





LAST CHANCE MINE

OR

Dale Wrightman's Pluck

BY

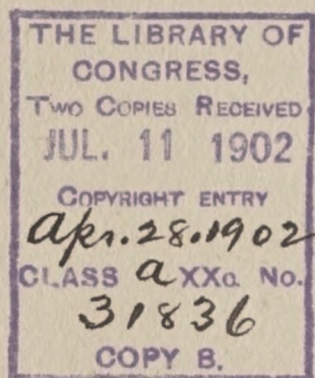
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Last Chance Mine

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LAST CHANCE MINE.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISCOVERY.

"Yes, Dale, I have struck it at last! Two years of hard work with never a sign of color, and then, suddenly, when least expecting it, what must prove the richest mine in New Mexico looms up before me."

"And it really is a fact? No mistake this time?" Dale Wrightman cried, as he seized his father's outstretched hands.

"No, my boy; I didn't trust to surface indications alone, but tested the vein thoroughly before leaving. Besides, it has been worked before; I simply found an abandoned mine."

"Silver?"

"Of course, one can't expect to find much gold in this section of the Territory."

"When shall you enter it up?"

"As soon as you give me a bite to eat. I have traveled four days and nights almost without stopping, and need a little something in the way of refreshment."

"You shall have the best, and all there is in the shanty," Dale cried, as he kindled a fire in the rude inclosure of stones which served as a stove. "The larder isn't any

too well filled, for I've had bad luck at money earning since you went away, and the food has run low."

"Never mind, my boy, we are rich now—rich beyond anything you ever dreamed of, and want will not be known again so far as you and I are concerned."

"Suppose some one else should discover the mine while you are away?"

"I'm not afraid of that," Mr. Wrightman replied, with a hearty laugh, which denoted satisfaction as well as a sense of security. "I'd been among the foothills for two months without seeing color, and had just begun to realize that it would be necessary to come back to Silver City empty-handed, as I have done so many times before. There was one side of bacon left, and I said to myself it should stand me for the last chance. Then if I failed, it would be a question of going hungry till I could get back. In a place where a sane prospector would never think of looking for surface indications, I found the richest vein that has ever been seen in these parts, with shaft sunk and tunnel running along the streak. It will remain hidden a long while yet, unless some one as desperate as I was noses around the spur."

"Then you did go hungry after all," Dale said, as he filled the frying pan with slices of bacon.

"Yes, indeed; but it makes a pile of difference whether a man does without food immediately after failure or after marvelous success. A glimpse of that vein was enough to satisfy me, providing I drew my belt tightly."

"And you are certain no one knows of the discovery?"

"That I can't say, unfortunately. I fell in with a

Greaser coming home, and it strikes me he had suspicions. He has kept precious close all the time, and to throw him off the scent I struck in here, instead of making things certain by entering the claim at once."

"Has he any idea of where you came from?"

"No; I was sharp enough for that, despite all his questions. As a matter of course he knows the general direction; but whether I had traveled one day or twenty when I met him, he hasn't an idea."

"Do you suppose he's fool enough to think he can discover the secret?"

"He's probably counting on finding out when I enter up; but I've got an idea he won't succeed so easily."

"Have you named the mine, father?"

"Yes; it's to be called the Last Chance, for that is exactly what it was. If I had failed when nothing but the one side of bacon remained, I'd have given up prospecting, and gone East again as soon as we scraped enough money together to pay for the railroad tickets."

"Well, here's to the Last Chance!" Dale cried, as he filled two tin cups with coffee, and his father drank the toast eagerly.

Nearly three years previous to the discovery of the mine referred to, Owen Wrightman and his son Dale arrived in Silver City, expecting to make a fortune in a short time, for the town, which sprang up as if by magic, was then in the height of its prosperity.

Dale's mother had died a few months before, and his father, in addition to the expectation of finding the pre-

cious metals, desired a thorough change in the hope it would enable him to forget his great loss.

Mr. Wrightman had been particularly unfortunate. The small amount of money he brought with him was soon spent, and the only means for continuing the work of prospecting was gained by such amounts as he or Dale could earn by working for others.

The journey which had resulted in the discovery of the Last Chance had been undertaken when both father and son were utterly discouraged, and, as Mr. Wrightman had said, if it proved a failure, both would have left Silver City with the one desire to be among friends once more.

Ephraim Minot, a good-natured, but not particularly brilliant fellow who formerly worked as gardener in the Wrightman home at the East, accompanied his old employer to the land where it was believed fortunes could be made so easily; but during nearly a year he had been laboring in one of the mines, and more than once did he insist on loaning Dale or his father small sums of money to enable them to eke out a scanty subsistence.

"Now Eph shall come back to us," Mr. Wrightman said, as he made a vigorous onslaught upon the provisions Dale set before him. "We can afford to pay him good wages, and the honest fellow must share in our fortunes."

"He deserves that and a great deal more, for there have been many times when we would have gone hungry but for him."

"He shan't be forgotten. I'll hunt him up when I go

to the register's office, and send him here. Be careful not to give him any idea of where the Last Chance is located, for there is no necessity of telling a single person until everything is arranged."

Dale laughed heartily.

"I reckon you can trust me, father, inasmuch as I don't know even the location of that famous place."

"I forgot you hadn't been told; but it's just as well. You shall see for yourself before a week goes by, and if you are in ignorance regarding it, there is no chance any one can worm the secret out of you by questioning you."

"I'm perfectly willing to wait."

By this time the bacon had been eaten, and Mr. Wrightman said, as he rose to his feet:

"It is time for me to attend to business, providing I can shake that Greaser. Stay here till I come back, and then we'll lay plans for getting to the Last Chance in the shortest possible space of time."

The happy prospector left the dwelling, which was little better than a shanty, and his son, overjoyed by the knowledge that the long fight with poverty was ended at last, set about making the interior look more inviting.

Now that his father had gone, Dale thought of a great many questions he wished to ask relative to the newly-discovered mine; but he contented himself with the thought that in a short time he would know everything regarding this particular deposit of precious metal which was to make them both wealthy.

An hour passed and yet Mr. Wrightman did not return.

"Most likely he's trying to shake the Greaser, and don't

have very good luck," Dale said to himself, as he looked toward the odd town, with its canvas tents or rough shanties of hewn boards.

The afternoon lengthened into evening, and yet the prospector was absent.

Dale's orders had been to remain at home, and he obeyed literally, instead of seeking his father in the settlement as he would have done under other circumstances.

When night had fully come Dale was alarmed.

Save in one or two exceptional cases, Mr. Wrightman had never remained away so late, and the boy became exceedingly nervous.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when he heard the sound of footsteps near the shanty, and, rushing out in the belief that his father had returned, Dale saw Ephraim Minot approaching slowly.

"Oh, it's you, Eph. I hoped it was father. Have you heard the news?"

"Who's been here?" Eph asked, as if in alarm. "I have come the fastest I knew how, an' thought to strike you before the others could."

"What others? Father got back this forenoon, and is up at the register's office, I reckon."

"He isn't there now; but he's coming back."

Dale failed to observe the tone in which this was said.

"Has he told you of the Last Chance?"

"What do you mean?"

"He has struck it rich this time, for a fact, and we won't have to jump around any more to earn two or three dollars a day."

"Had he struck a vein?"

"Yes, Eph, and we are to leave here just as soon as he can get ready."

"Did he go away alone?" Eph asked, solemnly.

"When do you mean?"

"After coming back and telling you the news, did he leave the shanty alone?"

"Yes, there was a Greaser somewhere around, and he wanted to shake him."

"Then it's one of them rascals who has done this!"

"What do you mean, Eph?" and now Dale began to grow alarmed at the expression on his companion's face.

"Dale, my lad, you must brace up. Remember that what's done couldn't have been helped, an' you've got to bear it."

"Tell me what has happened!" and the boy seized the man by the arm as if to force the information from his unwilling lips.

"Your father has been hurt, Dale, an' there come them who are bringing him home," Eph replied, as he pointed toward a group of men who were now within a few yards of the shanty.

Dale did not stop to ask any more questions.

Running forward swiftly, he would have pressed his way past the bearers of that ominous-looking burden, but that one, more soft-hearted than the others, held him back.

"Wait a while, lad. Stop till you've had time to think it over a bit, an' remember that we'll stand by you to the last."

"Is—is—is he badly hurt?" Dale cried, not daring to put into words the fear which had come into his mind.

"A knife through his back, my poor lad, an' if we don't swing the villain who did it, it'll be that he has got well out of this part of the country."

Dale could no longer be restrained; but, forcing his way past the friendly hands which would have kept him back, lifted the covering which hid his father's face from view.

Without a word he walked by the side of his murdered parent until the lifeless body was laid on the floor of the shanty, and then, with dry eyes and firmly-compressed lips, he began the last vigil beside the mangled remains.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE TRAIL.

In the exciting race for wealth, such as is seen at a mining camp, but little time can be devoted to the dead.

The taking of a human life is not of such a rare occurrence that it causes more than a ripple among those who live with weapons in their hands, and there was no exception in the case of Mr. Wrightman.

During the night following his murder, bodies of armed men scoured the town without finding any one on whom the crime could be fastened, and then it was time to close the page of the tragedy.

Dale watched by his father's side, silent and motionless during the hours of darkness, not speaking even to the faithful Eph, and then came a messenger to say that the funeral would be held at ten o'clock.

The boy had two hours longer with his dead; but he did not spend the time in mourning, however deep may have been his grief.

"Eph," he said, slowly, as he held one of the lifeless hands in his, "it is for me to deal out justice to the wretch who has killed, without cause, the best man who ever lived. Will you help me?"

"That I will, lad; but I'm afraid it'll be a wild goose chase."

"I know he must be found some day, that comes to me like a fact, and then, instead of being killed from behind, the villain shall see death approaching slowly. I swear I shall never rest until the hand which struck the cruel blow is as lifeless as this. It shall be my life work, and only when it is accomplished can I think of anything else."

"If it's revenge you're after, lad, count me in. Owen Wrightman was always a good friend to me, an' I'm ready to stick by you so long as there's a breath left in my body."

For reply, the boy joined hands with the faithful servant, and then asked to be left alone with his dead.

Until the miners began to gather, Dale remained in the shanty with his father's body, and then, at a word from Eph, he came forth.

The kindly-hearted men had brought a rude coffin, and when Dale emerged they prepared the body for burial.

It was a ceremony lacking all which one is accustomed to see at such times.

A few words spoken in praise of him who was thus consigned to the dust, the falling of clods on the coffin, and the prospector was left alone within a gunshot of the bustling city of canvas.

Before dispersing, one of the party, who had acted as master of ceremonies at the grave, said to Dale, as he extended a buckskin bag filled almost to bursting:

"We understand how tough it is on you, lad, an' know there's nothin' to be said that'll make you feel easier in mind. But them as is livin' must think of themselves,

an' we don't allow to let Owen Wrightman's son go empty-handed. The boys kinder took up a collection last night, an' here's the outcome of it. What are you thinkin' of doin'?"

"I shall find the villain who murdered my father, and when he has paid the penalty of his crime, then I'll decide what is to become of me."

"Good for you!" half a dozen cried, approvingly. "Now you're talkin' like a man, an' all we ask is a chance to jine the party when you get ready to settle accounts."

No reply that Dale could have made would have pleased his hearers better, for the law of the miners is "an eye for an eye," and the men gathered around him with offers of assistance.

"You have given me more than enough for an outfit," Dale replied, "and it is all I need now. When the time comes that I have the scoundrel in my power, you shall, if possible, see that full justice is done; but till then I shall most likely remain very far from here."

"Have you got any clew?" one asked, eagerly.

"Father came home yesterday, and told me he had found a very rich vein, which he intended to enter up as soon as he could get rid of a Greaser who was following him to learn the location of the claim."

"He didn't go to the register's office, 'cause it was shut up yesterday while a lot of the boys was helpin' a couple of hoss thieves dance on a rope."

"I believe the Greaser did the bloody work."

"Did you see him?"

"No; but it seems that I must recognize him if we meet."

"Where was the vein he found?"

"I don't know; he hadn't told me, but it took him four days and nights to get back."

"He started for the foothills around Rock Creek," one of the party said. "That's where he told me he was goin' the day he left, an' they're jest about that distance off."

"Who's seen a strange Greaser 'round here?" another asked.

"Joe Sellers traded his pony to one last night, an' I reckon he's your man, Dale. You can find out which way he went, an' all that's left is to ride him down."

"Eph an' I'll leave within an hour. We must pick up an outfit."

"Go to the Palace. Jake Myers shall rig both of you up in great style, or he'll never sell another bottle of liquor to this crowd."

Dale knew this offer was made in good faith, and that the men would take offense if it were not accepted.

"I thank you," he said, in a low, but firm tone. "We will go there at once, and the shanty can be used by any one. I'd like to have it standing when I get back."

"Don't fret about that, lad," the spokesman replied. "I'll move into it to-night, an' turn out ag'in the minute you're through with the job. Bring the Greaser back if you can, for the boys feel as if they had a right to help settle matters."

Dale did not delay longer.

He was eager to begin the work of vengeance, and to insure its success it was necessary he should start while the trail was "hot."

At the barroom dignified with the name of "The Palace," he found the proprietor, Jake Myers, who was more than willing to do all that lay in his power toward bringing the murderer to justice.

"Your father never spent any money here, Dale," he said, "an' that showed his good sense. He was my friend, an' anything I've got is yours. I'll send for a couple of ponies, an' the boys will get together an outfit to last a month or so. You'll need a pack mule, I reckon?"

"No; we must travel as light as possible. Eph and I have both got good rifles, and if we can't find game, it'll only be a question of going hungry. How much shall I pay you for the ponies, Mr. Myers?"

"Not a cent, an' I only wish there was more I could do."

An hour later Dale and Eph were mounted ready for the hunt which it was hoped would end in the taking of a villain's life.

They had two of Myers' best ponies, good saddles and blankets, and each carried in front of him such an amount of provisions as Dale was willing to burden himself with.

"Keep straight on to Rock Creek if you don't find the Greaser nearer," the landlord said. "That's where your father was bound for when he last left, an' it may turn out that you'll strike the vein he'd found."

"I am not counting on that. It will be enough to see justice done," Dale replied, gravely.

"That's all very well, my lad; but money is bound to come in handy, an' your father would have it that way if he could."

Then the kindly-hearted, but rough-looking men crowded around the travelers, insisting on shaking each by the hand, and when the two rode out of Silver City they were accompanied by the good wishes of all those left behind.

"Do you know the trail?" Eph asked, when they were a short distance beyond the mining town.

"I've been down to Bruneau Valley, and there is where we may get some news of the man we are hunting for."

"Then you allow it was the same fellow who started last night?"

"That is the only clew we've got. I'm certain the murderer was the Greaser father spoke of, and the one who left yesterday must be he."

"It's a blind trail," Eph said, with a sigh, "an' I'm afraid it'll be a long day before we see the end of it."

"If we do finally succeed, I don't care how many weeks or months we spend," Dale replied, emphatically.

During the next hour the two rode on at rather more than moderate speed, and then they drew rein alongside a wagon train which was proceeding in the same direction.

"Have you come from Silver City?" Dale asked of the leader.

"Left there yesterday mornin', an' broke down five miles out, so we're makin' it kinder slow."

"Have you seen a Greaser on a spotted pony?"

"One camped with us last night."

"Where did he hail from?"

"The city. Seemed to be in a hurry, an' pushed ahead before sunrise."

"Which way did he go?"

"I allowed he was headin' for Bruneau Valley, though nothin' was said about it. Been stealin' hosses?"

"Some one murdered my father, Owen Wrightman, last night, and I believe it was a Greaser."

"Then he's your man, an' I only wish I could jine you in the ride, for Owen was a partic'lar friend of mine. Poor feller! how was it done?"

Dale hurriedly gave him the details of the crime so far as known, and the driver said half to himself:

"A knife in the back, eh? That's a reg'lar Mexican trick. Keep after him, my boy, an' if you don't pick up the trail before, you'll find it at the valley. Can I do anything to help you along?"

"No; but I thank you for the desire. Come, Eph, we must ride hard and long now," Dale said, as he struck the spurs to his pony, and soon the wagon train was left far behind.

Not until late in the evening did the two draw rein, and then they were forced to do so because the horses were completely winded.

A camp in the open air with nothing to shelter them, save the blankets, was not thought a hardship.

Eph prepared supper, but Dale could not eat.

Even the thought of food was distasteful, and the boy,

after caring for his pony, lay down on the ground with but one thought in his mind—that of vengeance.

On the regular trail as they were, there was no reason why a watch should be kept, and Eph was soon wrapped in slumber; but Dale could not compose himself.

Grief rendered him wakeful, and after trying in vain to close his eyes in sleep, he rose to his feet, pacing to and fro by the side of his companion.

The night was more than half spent when Eph was awakened by a vigorous shaking, and, looking up sleepily, saw Dale bending over him.

"Get up quickly!" the boy cried. "There's mischief of some kind being done near us. That light comes from the direction of a ranch I once visited with father!" and he pointed toward the south, where the heavens were aglow.

"Is it a fire?" Eph asked, as he rose slowly to his feet.

"Yes, and it stands us in hand to know what is going on. Saddle and follow me!"

CHAPTER III.

MORE TROUBLE.

The ranch to which Dale referred was about three miles off the direct trail leading to Bruneau Valley, toward the south, and owned by a stockman from Colorado, who had taken up and purchased a large quantity of land in the vicinity.

At the time Dale stopped at the ranch the owner and his family were absent on a visit East, therefore he saw only the overseer; but that gentleman proved to be so hospitable that he had often looked forward to a second visit.

When he and Eph were in the saddle, riding as rapidly as their jaded horses would permit, Dale began to think he had been too hasty in taking alarm.

The conflagration might mean nothing serious. A clump of trees, an outbuilding or something of the kind, would have made quite as much of a blaze, but Dale was in that frame of mind when everything seems to betoken deadly danger.

After having ridden a couple of miles, however, there was no chance for doubt but that the flames had been kindled for a fiendish purpose.

The sound of firearms could be heard faintly in the distance, telling that some one was fighting for life, and

Dale cried, as he spurred the tired pony to yet greater exertions:

"We must get there soon, or be too late! Ride the best you know how, Eph."

"That won't be very fast, lad. This pony was about played out when we made camp, an' he don't seem able to go more than three miles an hour. What do you allow is the trouble?"

"I can't so much as fancy. There's no chance of Indians around here, and——"

"There's been a reg'lar mob of Greasers hangin' about this section of the country for the last month, so I've heard say."

"Perhaps the one we're hunting for has found a gang, but I hope not."

"Why?"

"Because we have no description of our game, and only by running him down singly can we hope to make sure of catching the right one."

"It'll go hard with any of the breed that I find ridin' a spotted pony."

There was no further opportunity for conversation.

The two were now where the buildings of the ranch could be seen, or, at least, those which had as yet escaped the flames, and that a regular attack had been made there was no longer any question.

Everything inflammable was food for the flames, and here and there the blaze brought into strong relief certain ominous-looking masses of what had once been human beings.

The fight was over before Dale and Eph came within sight of the place.

The enemy had fled, or continued his march, and nothing could be seen of the former inmates, save those dark forms outlined against the sky.

"We're too late!" Eph said, as he reined in his pony opposite one of the lifeless forms. "What puzzles me is how the thing happened. I didn't s'pose a lot of Greasers would have the nerve to do anything like this so far from the line."

Dale paid no attention to what his companion said.

He was gazing anxiously around in the hope of seeing alive some of the unfortunate inmates, and, failing in this, he shouted at the full strength of his lungs:

"Hello! We're friends come to help you!"

Twice was the cry repeated before any answer came, and then an old woman hobbled out from beneath a burning shanty, the blood on her wrinkled face glaring vividly red in the glow of the flames.

"Who are you?" she asked, in a trembling voice.

"Friends, from Silver City. What has been done here?"

"Murder and worse! Why do you sit still when the child is in the power of those wretches, those human fiends?"

"You must tell us more, or we shall not be able to do anything. Who made this attack, and why?"

"I believe they were a party of Mexicans; they could have come only for plunder, and found Nina!"

"Who is she?"

"The master's daughter, and woe's the day she stayed here with me instead of going with her parents!"

It was a long while before Dale could get a complete story from the terrified woman, and when she did give any information it was in a disconnected form.

The substance of it all was that two or three hours previously the ranch had been attacked by a party of men dressed in Mexican costume, who had ridden in asking for lodging and food.

Mr. Morey, the owner of the ranch, was on a visit East, with all his family save the eldest daughter, Nina, a girl seventeen years of age, who had remained behind.

The strangers had hardly gained entrance to the inclosure, when they began shooting down the ranchmen and servants without warning, and nearly half the force had been killed before any concerted resistance was made.

Then the defenders were so few in number, and taken at such a disadvantage, that the battle was of but short duration.

The horses were driven off, stock stampeded, the buildings fired, and then came the pillage of the house, during which the young girl was discovered.

The leader of the party insisted on taking her prisoner, although some of his followers insisted she should share the fate of the others, and she was torn from the old woman's arms despite the latter's feeble resistance.

A knife thrust which laid the servant's cheek open to the bone told what she had done in defence of Nina, and the ruffians left her for dead on the ground.

She had revived sufficiently to crawl under one of the

outbuildings, which was fired soon after, and, but for the arrival of Dale and Eph, she would probably have been burned to death.

Although suffering severely, her only thought was of the girl who had been made prisoner by these human fiends, and many times before the sad story was finished did she beg Dale to go to Nina's assistance.

"That is exactly what we intend to do," the boy replied, finally, looking toward Eph for some word of assurance that he would follow, and the latter replied:

"It can't be thought of till mornin', lad. The ponies are so jaded now that it would be worse than foolish to think of overtakin' the murderers. The only way is to start fresh by givin' them a rest and plenty of feed."

"And in the meantime, what may become of the poor girl?"

"Try not to think of that. We're bound to stay here a while, if we expect to do anything; but, in case you say go now, I'm off."

Dale knew that his companion had spoken only the truth.

Hampered as the murderers were with the stolen animals, it was not likely they could travel very rapidly, and by waiting until the ponies were comparatively fresh there was every hope the marauding party might be overtaken before morning.

"You are right," he finally said. "Look out for the horses, and I'll see if there are any more left alive."

"Stay here; you need rest as much as do the animals. I'll attend to everything."

The old woman was still imploring him to go at once in search of her darling, and Dale whispered:

“How could any one rest with those pleadings sounding in his ears? Can’t you dress her wounds, while I care for the ponies?”

Eph undertook to do this, and Dale led the animals away where he could not hear the pleadings he was powerless at that moment to answer.

A short search among the half-consumed buildings was sufficient to find grain, and, with a plentiful meal before them, the ponies were picketed, while the boy continued on around the ruined ranch.

Near the entrance to the cattle corral Dale found a ranchman half-unconscious, whose life-blood was slowly welling from a cruel wound in his breast.

Dale’s first thought was to stanch the flow of the crimson fluid; but this work had hardly been begun when the sufferer said in a whisper so low that it was only with considerable difficulty his would-be nurse could hear the words:

“There’s no use in that. They got me foul, an’ all the doctors in the world couldn’t help me now. Who are you?”

Dale explained how he and Eph happened to be there, and concluded by saying:

“We shall go in search of the girl Nina as soon as our horses are rested. Can you give me any description of the men who did this cruel thing?”

“They are a gang of Greasers, about fifty strong, who have been campin’ a couple of miles from here for the

last three days. Their leader went up Silver City way, an' got back an hour or so before the attack was made."

"Did you see him?"

"Only while the fight was goin' on. He's a short fellow, an' rode a spotted pony. I noticed that he wore big gold rings in his ears."

It was necessary for Dale to exert all his will power to prevent an exclamation of joy as the man whom he believed had murdered his father was thus described. He succeeded in restraining himself, however, for it was necessary he should hear all that could be told, and the sufferer was so near death that any interruption might have checked the story forever.

"Did you see in what direction they went?" he asked, as the wounded man paused.

"Toward the Valley. I reckon they're makin' their headquarters there for a while, as a crowd of 'em did last year."

"Have they taken any other prisoner than Nina?"

"I saw two of the men tied on a pony, an' shouldn't be surprised to know that they'd got more. Count up the bodies here, an' if you don't find sixteen all told, then allow the balance are in the power of them devils. The men can stand it, for durin' the past year we've been expectin' somethin' of the kind, but for the poor women it'll be worse than death."

"My friend and I will do all in our power to save them."

"I believe you, lad; but two against that gang is odds

too big to count much on. Look out for your own lives, which will be about all you can 'tend to."

"I believe the man who led the gang is the one who murdered my father in Silver City twenty-four hours ago, and I'd follow the villain if he had ten times the force," Dale replied, emphatically.

"Go ahead, my boy, you act as if you had sand; but don't do anything rash. Look the ground well over before you try to take a trick, for——"

The advice was not finished.

Death came to claim its prey, and Dale felt the hand he was holding grow cold with the chill of the grave.

CHAPTER IV.

BRUNEAU VALLEY.

The most difficult task which Dale and Eph believed they should ever be confronted with was that of waiting at the devastated ranch while the lawless ruffians were carrying off their prisoners unmolested.

The old woman would not or could not think there was any good reason why they should remain idle at such a time, and her constant prayers that they hasten at once in pursuit tried their nerves most severely.

"We mustn't listen to her," Eph said, as he led Dale to the further end of the ranch. "It would be the rankest kind of folly to start until after the ponies are in something like decent shape, an' if you can't sleep, there's plenty to be done."

Dale knew to what his companion referred, and he said, readily:

"We'll go to work. It will be terrible; but the poor fellows must have some kind of a burial, and we are the only ones to do the work. Have you searched the entire grounds?"

"Every yard. The old woman, an' the man you found, are the only ones that were left alive."

"How many bodies?"

"Counting the two we spoke of, there are eleven."

"I don't suppose the man who just died reckoned on the old woman, so there must be four men prisoners in the ruffians' hands."

"She says there were other female servants, and, as their bodies are not here, it stands to reason the gang have got them."

While they were speaking, Dale and Eph began the ghastly work of burying the dead, and the sun had just risen when the labor was finished.

The ponies were now in reasonably good condition for the journey, and no time was lost in making the start.

The woman seemed a trifle more composed now, and able to render some assistance to those who were going in search of her lost one.

She found cooked food sufficient to provide them with a hearty meal, and Dale said, when they were finally ready to mount:

"We intend to go to the Bruneau Valley. If any others come along who are willing to join the hunt, send them there."

"When shall I expect to see you back?"

"Not until we have finished the work, either by bringing Miss Nina to you, or settling matters with the villain who led the gang."

Neither Dale nor Eph cared to prolong the conversation with the nurse. Her lamentations, although not quite so loud as on the previous night, were distressing, and the two leaped into their saddles at the first opportunity.

"With such a large party we should be able to follow

the trail without any difficulty," Dale said, as they rode around the ruined ranch toward the south, avoiding, as if by common consent, that spot of ground which they had converted into a graveyard.

"Yes, an' since they must move slow because of the animals an' prisoners, we want to take good care not to get too nigh while it's light. The worst thing that could happen would be for 'em to suspect what we are up to."

"There's no danger of getting too near between now and noon, so ride at your best pace till then."

The broad trail was readily followed.

The murderers had made no effort to hide the telltale evidences of their march, and none save a blind man could have lost it.

That the band had carried away a large amount of plunder could be told by the odds and ends which the pursuers came across from time to time.

Fragments of wearing apparel, cast-off finery, bits of harness, and such articles as would naturally be found in a ranchman's home were strewn along the trail in abundance.

"They are in no hurry," Dale said, as he examined the different things without drawing rein. "This shows that they have time to examine the plunder, and are throwing away what isn't wanted."

Two hours later the pursuers arrived at the spot where the party had encamped for a short time.

The fires were yet burning, and the odor of food was in the air, thus showing that the enemy could not be very far in advance.

At the place Dale alighted, and examined the ground thoroughly.

A riding glove of chamois skin was found near where the horses had been tethered, and Dale picked it up almost reverentially.

In addition to Miss Nina, there were probably three other female prisoners; but he chose to believe the glove had been dropped by her, and placed it carefully in his pocket without telling Eph of the find.

The latter, after looking carefully around a few moments, began to unsaddle, and Dale asked sharply:

"What are you doing?"

"Givin' the pony a chance to rest. We should keep 'em in the best possible condition."

"But we don't intend to stop here?"

"Why not?"

"Because we must close up on the scoundrels."

"It strikes me that we're near enough now. It won't take half-an-hour to bring them in sight."

"Then all the more reason why we should keep on."

"I'm bound to do as you say," Eph replied, solemnly; "but I want you to stop an' think what the result'll be if they see us."

"It will be an easy matter to keep out of sight when we're within a mile or so. Think of that poor girl, and fancy what her sufferings must be!"

"I'll do that, an' at the same time have some regard for myself. How much will you be able to help the girl when once them Greasers know we're at their heels?"

"I'll be as prudent as you wish when we are nearer, but can't consent to stopping yet a while."

"You may think different before this day is ended," Eph muttered; but he replaced the saddle and mounted, Dale saying, as he spurred the willing pony on:

"I don't count on being rash, and think we should close up on them a good bit while there's time. How far ahead do you suppose they are?"

"That camp-fire was burnin' bright half-an-hour ago, an' I reckon thirty minutes of hard ridin' would bring us into the whole nest."

Dale made no reply. He was beginning to think perhaps it would have been better had they remained a short time at the last halting place, but his desire to rescue Miss Nina and at the same moment avenge the murder of his father was so great that prudence was forgotten.

During half-an-hour the two rode on at a rapid pace, and Dale was on the point of giving the word to stop, when from behind a rock forty or fifty yards ahead came a puff of smoke, and a bullet made its way through the brim of his hat.

"Get down, lad!" Eph cried, as he threw himself from the saddle, holding the loop of the bridle on his arm.

Dale had sprung to the ground before the words were spoken, and was behind his horse with his rifle ready for a shot the instant he caught a glimpse of the living target.

Another puff of smoke, and a second bullet plowed a deep ridge in the boy's saddle.

"Get under cover!" Eph shouted, as he led his pony

back to a clump of bushes. "You can't do anything there while they're behind the rock!"

Dale caught a glimpse of a man's head for an instant, and that was sufficient to send one of the murderous gang to his last account.

In that State, where all are good marksmen and "quick on the trigger," there was none who could excel "Owen Wrightman's boy," according to the evidence of his acquaintances, and this snap shot proved the correctness of the statement. "I've downed one of them, at any rate," Dale said, in a tone of triumph, as he backed his pony toward the bushes. "I don't reckon there's more'n another, an' he'll be precious lucky to get away alive. I used to think I couldn't draw bead on a man; but, after what has been done, I can't look upon these fellows as any better than snakes."

"I'd rather chum with a decent rattler than a Greaser, any day," Eph replied. "But it ain't a question now of what we do or don't like. If there's another feller behind that rock it's our business to see he don't leave, otherwise the jig is up."

"If you'll stay here, and shoot once in a while, so's to keep him busy, I'll crawl up to the right, and then it's pretty certain he'll stay as long as we want him to."

"Go ahead, lad, but be careful of yourself. Them kind of cattle are up to more tricks than there are fleas on a dog."

"I'll look out for anything of that kind. Give him a shot now, and I'll start."

Eph fired, and an instant later a puff of smoke told there was at least one living man behind the rock.

"Keep him at that kind of work five minutes, and the business will be finished," Dale said, as he made a long detour to the right, crawling on the ground when there was neither bush nor rock to afford him shelter.

Eph discharged his rifle from time to time, but only once more did he provoke a reply, and then it was as if the man in hiding suspected his purpose.

Meanwhile, Dale continued to advance steadily but slowly.

He had time to realize that he should have followed Eph's advice in regard to prolonging the halt at the encampment, for nothing especial could be gained from this kind of warfare, but regrets were useless now, and he bent every energy to the task of repairing the mischief already done.

Fully half-an-hour elapsed before he was where it was possible to catch even a glimpse of the enemy, and then ten minutes more were spent in creeping nearer to make certain of his prey.

Two huge boulders, so situated as to form a deep angle, was the spot selected by the Greasers for their ambush, and half-a-dozen could readily have found shelter behind the barricade from an enemy approaching from the direction of Silver City.

The body of the one who fell at Dale's first shot had been thrown out to give the other more room, and in the thicket twenty yards away were several ponies tethered.

The boy was so eager to put an end to the fight that he

failed to observe the number of animals, otherwise he would have been more cautious.

He was in position to fire, when the man behind the rock stepped a few paces in the rear to reload his weapon, and Dale discharged his rifle.

The Mexican spun around an instant like a top, and then pitched forward on his face.

"We've settled him! Come on, Eph!" Dale shouted, as he rose to his feet, and was on the point of running forward, when the muzzle of a rifle was projected above the rock, and the boy understood that there were yet more of the enemy in ambush, while his own weapon was empty.

CHAPTER V.

A DANGEROUS SITUATION.

Dale was tully alive to the danger of the situation.

He knew beyond a question that the Mexican was on the point of firing, and instantly he took the only course in which there was the slightest chance of success.

One could hardly have counted more than five from the moment the muzzle of the rifle was seen before Dale dropped suddenly to the ground.

By a sort of intuition, he realized that the fellow was about to shoot, and only the merest fraction of time elapsed from the execution of his maneuver until the report of the rifle was heard.

The Mexican evidently believed he had hit the target, for he sprang forward to draw the supposedly lifeless body behind the rock in order to plunder it, and at the same instant Dale was ready for the struggle which could end only with the death of one.

As the fellow bent over him, the boy flung up his arms, catching the enemy around the neck, and, bending him down in such a manner that it was impossible for the man to draw the knife from his belt.

In the meanwhile, Eph was coming up at full speed, having heard the last report, and understanding exactly how his companion had been mistaken.

When he arrived at the scene of the conflict, however, it was impossible to aid his friend.

The two, locked in a close embrace, were rolling over and over on the ground, each struggling to gain the mastery, and neither able to use his weapons.

Dale wore a keen-edged knife at his belt, but it was impossible to draw it, and the Greaser, unable to get at his own, was doing the best he knew how to seize it.

"Hold him still a second!" Eph cried, as he came nearer, hoping to get a chance to shoot.

He might as well have asked Dale to toss the fellow in the air like a ball, so far as the boy's ability to comply with the request was concerned.

He had all he could do to prevent the knife-thrust, without attempting to act upon the defensive, and understood only too well that he could not continue the struggle many seconds longer.

"He's getting the best of me!" Dale panted, and even as the words were spoken the Greaser succeeded in drawing his adversary's knife.

There was no longer time for Eph to hesitate.

He must act even at the risk of inflicting deadly injury on the boy he was eager to save.

The man raised the glittering steel, and, as he did so, Eph brought down the barrel of his rifle on the uplifted arm.

The weapon was dashed aside, and, as the fellow winced from the pain, Dale succeeded in turning him on his back,

Eph sprang forward; there was a sudden report, and the life-blood spurted over the boy's face and hands, as the Greaser lay motionless in death.

Dale sprang to his feet, pale and trembling.

Although it was a deadly enemy who had been killed, the fact savored too much of murder, and, faint and sick at heart, he staggered against the rock, closing his eyes to shut out from view the evidences of the short but bloody fight.

"That was soon over, but it looked like a mighty tight squeak for you," Eph said, as he reloaded his weapon, and then began searching the bodies of the slain, as eager for plunder as any of those whom he was pursuing could have been.

"Don't do that!" Dale said, in a low tone. "It seems as if we had done this thing simply for an opportunity to rob."

"It's only turn about, an' that's fair play," Eph replied, as he continued his work. "They would have done the same by us, an' it's best to give this kind of vermin a taste of their own medicine."

"If the remainder of the gang are near, the report of our rifles will bring them down on us soon," Dale said, in the same low tone, but roused by the thought that the danger was not yet over.

"You're right, lad, though I reckon these fellows kept a long distance in the rear. It's hard luck for us, because, when night comes an' they don't jine the main body, there'll be a search made. What's more, it's the same as tellin' 'em we're on the trail."

Eph had finished his work of rifling the dead, and, as he spoke, held up three well-filled bags of gold dust.

"Put it out of sight," Dale said, with a shudder.

"That's jest what I'm goin' to do. 'Cordin' to the weight of these, the Greasers have been makin' a payin' trip out of this raid."

"What are we to do now?"

"Look over the hoss flesh, an' if it's better'n ourn, swap."

"I'd rather keep my own pony than take one of theirs."

"Bless you, lad, them hosses most likely were taken from the Morey ranch last night, an' these fellers hadn't half as much right to 'em as we have."

On a closer inspection, however, Eph decided that there was no good reason why an exchange should be made.

Their own animals were equally as fresh as those ridden by the Mexicans, and Dale said:

"Turn them loose; we sha'n't make anything by swapping."

"It won't pay to leave the saddles on. Them an' the blankets must be hidden somewhere near."

"Why?"

"S'pose we rescued the girl, or any of the other prisoners, wouldn't it come in mighty handy if they had something to ride on?"

"That is true, but what good will a saddle be without anything under it?"

"When it comes to a row we'll find ponies enough, but they may not all be ready for use."

There was common sense in this argument, and Dale

at once assisted in depositing the blankets, bridles and saddles in the thicket, where they would be hidden from view of any one who might pass.

This done, the question arose as to whether they should continue the pursuit, or wait until later in the day, when it might be possible to come upon the camp without running the risk of meeting stragglers.

Strange as it may seem, the positions were now reversed. Eph was in favor of pushing forward, while Dale urged that they remain in the rear.

"I didn't talk that way a little while ago," the former said, "but then we hadn't met the vermin what was stoppin' behind the rock waitin' for Gabriel to sound his trump. They was sent out to guard the rear, an' it stands us in hand to creep up while there's nobody to say anything ag'in it."

Dale, who realized that through his impatience the work of freeing the captives, as well as that of making the leader a prisoner, had been retarded, now became too cautious, and would have ridden back a few miles to remain in hiding but for the weight of Eph's arguments.

"We've done all the mischief possible, an' must now take what little advantage remains to be gained," the latter said. "I didn't want to come quite so nigh, but, seein's how the mischief's been done, we can't do anything better than push ahead."

Remembering what his own impetuosity had brought about, and realizing that Eph's advice must be better than his own opinion, because of experience, Dale gave way by saying:

"Do whatever you think best, and I'll follow."

"Now you're talkin' sense, lad. I don't claim to be much of a fighter, but it's a mighty cold day when I can't get the best of a crowd of Greasers so far as sneaking is concerned?"

"What do you propose?"

"That we get as near the main body of the murderers as possible, an', when night comes, make one bold rush to set the prisoners free."

"Come on, I'm ready to follow your advice in every particular, since my own opinion has proven so much at fault."

"I ain't countin' on ridin' right among 'em," Eph replied, as he mounted his pony with a certain deliberation which told that he was undecided as to the most prudent course of action.

"What then?"

"We must hang behind till it's possible to find out the general arrangement of the camp, an' then we'll know what to do."

"But your plan requires hours, and we can't afford to lose a single one."

"It's better to go to work easy like, an' lose time rather than our lives."

"But, Eph, think of Nina!"

"Who's she?"

"Mr. Morey's daughter."

"Well, she's no better than the rest of the poor creeters what are in the Greasers' power, an' we must take time to help any of 'em."

It was difficult for Dale to restrain his impatience, but he knew of no plan worthy of mention, and therefore held his peace.

In less than an hour from the time the battle with the rear guard began the pursuers were on the trail once more, this time riding cautiously, and halting at every rise of the land lest they should come upon the enemy unawares.

On beginning the journey Dale's only thought had been to avenge the murder of his father, but now this was a secondary matter as compared with the release of Nina, a young lady whom he had never seen.

He could fancy her in the power of the man who rode the spotted pony, and the thought was maddening.

To control his impatience seemed impossible, and more than once before the chase came to an end did he resolve to insist upon Eph's advancing more rapidly.

Fortunately, he waited before making complaint as to the slow advance, and when, just at nightfall, they came within sight of the outlaws' encampment, Dale realized that they had arrived none too late.

The Greasers had formed camp on the plain at the base of one of the foothills, where a stream wound through the grass within easy walking distance, and the undulations of the land afforded every possibility of a defense.

It could now be seen by the two, who were on an elevation fully five hundred feet above the band, that the force of the Greasers was much larger than had been fancied.

There were not less than a hundred men, and three

times that number of ponies and cattle, all drawn up in such a manner that if the animals were shot down they would afford a barricade to the human beings.

"Can you see the prisoners?" Dale asked anxiously, as he searched with his eyes in vain for the young lady whom he had mentally resolved to save, or to perish in the attempt.

"They are behind that clump of bushes, 'cordin' to my reckonin'. See how many sentinels are posted at the place."

"It won't be an easy matter to make our way through there."

"You are right, lad, an' it begins to look as if we'd have to lay low for a while, 'cause it would be more'n a man's life was worth to go into the camp."

"And yet that is exactly what we must do before to-morrow morning," Dale said, half to himself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ENEMY'S CAMP.

Dale and Eph were where they could overlook the encampment without fear of being seen by the enemy.

The latter had insisted on riding around the hill to a place so far above the Mexicans there was little danger they would suspect an attack from that point, and here the two could distinguish all that was going on below.

The men were lounging about in attitudes suggestive of comfort, and it was possible to count the captives, who were exposed to the full glare of the sun.

Dale, thinking only of Miss Nina, searched with his eyes until he could distinguish three female prisoners lashed to the trees, but the fourth, and the one he was most eager to see, was not in sight.

"She's with the leader of the gang," Eph said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Look over by that clump of bushes where the rays of the sun are shut off by the shadow of the hill, and' you can make out a couple of fellers standin' guard. It's dollars to doughnuts that the man who rode the spotted pony is near abouts."

That this particular spot was the camping-place of the chief there seemed little doubt from the general indications, and Dale took careful notes of the surroundings, that he might be able to distinguish them in the darkness.

"That is where we must go to-night," he said, after a long pause.

"What for?"

"To rescue Miss Nina."

"Why not cut your own throat now, an' save all that trouble?"

"What do you mean?"

"That it would be better to give up the fight here than try to go through the camp."

"It can be done if a fellow looks out for himself."

"A hundred men to back us would not be enough. Them men fight like devils, an' sneakin' round among 'em ain't child's play by any manner of means."

"At the same time, Eph, we must save those poor women."

"You're right, so far as that goes, but it won't be done by venturin' into the lion's mouth."

"I look upon them only as jackals."

"Better give them credit for something better, an' then you won't stand so many chances of comin' to grief. I know the kind of customers we have to deal with, an' don't feel like runnin' big risks."

Although he would not admit it, Dale understood that nothing could be effected by making a rush, yet it needed the conversation with his more practical companion to convince him he must remain quiet.

The Greasers appeared to feel perfectly secure. It is true that the camp had been formed with a view to resisting an attack, but yet at the same time it could readily be seen that they did not fear one.

The men were lounging around the fires before which the cooks were working, the majority playing cards, others throwing dice, and all engaged in some kind of gambling.

Dale searched with his eyes for the leader, but failed to see any one who appeared to act in that capacity.

Mounted, he could have distinguished him by the spotted pony, but at rest there was nothing to mark him from the rank and file, and, failing to single out Miss Nina from the captives, it seemed certain the chief must have selected her as his especial prisoner.

Had Dale caught a glimpse of the man whom he suspected of having murdered his father, knowing he held the young girl a captive, it is positive he would have taken deadly aim, regardless of the result, and this Eph seemed to fear, for he said, in a soothing tone:

"See here, lad, we can't accomplish anything among these villains without a little patience. If you'll hold your temper I'll guarantee that we get the best of this crowd in the long run."

"And in the meantime Miss Nina is to be left unprotected in that camp of rascals."

"It wouldn't make any difference in the general arrangement of matters whatever you might do, except that by bein' made prisoners we should lose all chance of giving her a helpin' hand. Lay low till sunset, an' I'll take a trip through the camp to see what can be done."

"That is exactly what I propose doing myself."

"Better let me go, I've had more experience in sich work, an' oughter take the chances."

"I shall try it myself," Dale replied, in a tone which admitted of no further argument, and Eph wisely remained silent.

The watchers had not long to wait for the coming of night.

Already were the shadows gathering, and even as they spoke the gloom descended upon the valley, shutting out from view everything save the glow of the camp-fires.

"You will wait here for me," Dale said, as he handed his rifle to Eph, and examined the revolver to make certain it was ready for use.

"Do you count on leavin' now?"

"I propose to approach the camp as near as is safe, and there wait for an opportunity to let those poor people know we are ready to aid them."

"Be careful not to put yourself in their place without accomplishing anything."

"Don't fear for me, Eph, and in case I should get the worst of it there can be but little difference."

"Except that alone I shouldn't try to do anything toward helpin' Miss Nina. You must hold your own or she is lost."

Although Eph did not mean all he said, the implied threat was sufficient to render Dale more cautious, and he reviewed the situation with different feelings.

"It is hardly likely I can do much good," he said, thoughtfully; "but it will at least be possible to let the prisoners know we mean to give them assistance."

"Remember your father's murder is as yet unavenged,

and you must take good care of yourself for that purpose," Eph said, carelessly.

This was sufficient to recall Dale to the aim of his life, and he replied in a different tone:

"I won't forget what we have come for, Eph, but it may be I shall see a way to pay my debt without following these murderers any longer."

"I hope you will," was the guarded reply, and then Dale started on his dangerous mission.

Clambering cautiously down the hillside, taking advantage of every bush and rock which might afford him shelter, Dale approached the camp of the Greasers, keeping ever in mind the place where he believed the leader had taken up his quarters.

Within ten minutes after leaving Eph he was so near that it was possible to hear the conversation of those around him, who were hidden only by the darkness, and from this he could form a very good idea of what the ruffians proposed to do.

"There's plenty of time yet to make a stake here in the States," one of the troopers was saying, as Dale passed within a few yards of their camp-fire. "We needn't fear pursuit for a week, and before then we shall be across the border, providing the supply of horse flesh continues as good as we've found it for the past four days."

"The captain has his eye on something besides ponies," another of the party replied. "By the way he's goin' on over there, I should say we'd better start an old woman's home, instead of spending time burnin' ranches."

"He's hard hit for a fact, but I reckon he'll recover before many days. Leave him alone till the dream wears off."

It would have been an easy matter for Dale to shoot the gossipers down from where he stood, and his fingers did play nervously with the trigger of his revolver, but, fortunately, he remembered in time how much depended upon his visit remaining a secret, and succeeded in checking his anger.

That he was able to pass unchallenged in the very midst of the camp showed how safe from pursuit the villains believed themselves to be, and Dale passed on, feeling that never again would he have any compunction against shooting such scoundrels.

"I could kill the leader of this gang in cold blood, and never turn a hair," he said to himself, as he crept toward the spot where he believed the murderer of his father had made his camp.

Before proceeding a dozen yards he was brought to a standstill by coming in contact with a pile of goods thrown carelessly down near a clump of trees, as they had been removed from the pack animals.

It was the plunder the ruffians had brought away from the Morey ranch, and probably consisted of a general assortment of such things as would ordinarily be found in the dwelling of a wealthy ranchman.

Dale paid no further attention to the goods, save to make his way carefully around them, and then suddenly he became aware, from the sound of heavy breathing, that he was very near a human being.

His first idea was that it might be one of the Greasers, who, suspecting his presence, was skulking around with the hope of taking him by surprise, but then came the thought that he was standing beside a prisoner.

With the utmost caution he advanced sufficiently to ascertain that it was a man whom he had heard, and the fact of his being tied to a tree. There was some little risk in making his presence known, but he did not hesitate any longer than was necessary to prepare the stranger for a surprise by pressing his hand over the latter's mouth as he whispered:

"Are you one of those taken from the Morey ranch?"

He could feel that the man bowed his head, and then he released his hold to hear the words:

"You must be a friend! Help me rescue Miss Nina!"

"Where is she?"

"In the encampment somewhere; I saw her just before dark."

While he was speaking, Dale had been severing the man's bonds, and the prisoner was hardly freed when a loud shouting was heard from the main body of the Greasers, who were further down the hillside on the plain.

In an instant everything was in apparent confusion.

Men ran to and fro, some carrying torches, and all in a state of excitement, until there was every danger Dale would be discovered.

"Which way did you come from?" the released prisoner asked, hurriedly.

"My friend is higher up on the hill."

"Then you must get back at once. Something has happened to cause alarm."

"Follow me, for, of course, you want to leave the camp."

"Yes, but not to go very far while these poor women are in the power of such brutes."

Cautiously but hurriedly, Dale led the way up the hill, and in a short time the two were by the side of Eph, who said in a matter-of-fact tone to the boy:

"They've jest found out why them fellers we met up by the rocks don't come back. It looks as if we might have a hot time before mornin', unless we can lay mighty snug."

CHAPTER VII.

BESIEGED.

That Eph's conjecture was correct seemed positive from the movements of the men.

They moved to and fro uneasily until some order was given in a loud tone, when half a dozen mounted and rode off at full speed.

"That was Espinosa who spoke then," the rescued prisoner said, in a whisper.

"Who's he?" Eph asked.

"The leader of the cutthroats. He was once flogged by Mr. Morey for insulting somebody, and since that time has threatened to destroy the property. We heard three weeks ago that he was enlisting in his service all the Greasers in the vicinity, but had no idea the day for the attack was so near at hand."

"How many has he with him?"

"I should think there could not be less than a hundred, each one ready for any cruel or desperate deed."

"Were you taken completely by surprise at the ranch?"

"So much so that four were killed before we knew where to look for the enemy."

"Why did he make prisoners of the men?"

"To flog them to death, and he threatens to do the same by Mr. Morey. How did you hit upon our trail?"

Dale related all the particulars, including the murder of his father, and concluded by saying:

"It doesn't seem as if two, or I should say three now, could effect much against the villains, but yet we intend to try. Of course we can count you with us?"

"While a drop of blood remains in my body; but I am afraid there is little opportunity for work to-night. The camp will be on the alert, since the death of the three rear-guard is probably known, and more than likely the entire vicinity will be searched. Until now they have traveled without fear of pursuit."

Then the man, who gave his name as Jack Barstow, told the detailed story of the attack upon the ranch; but he related nothing which Dale and Eph had not already heard from the old nurse.

"I should have continued right on, and done my best to find Miss Nina while I was in the camp," Dale said, thoughtfully, when the sad tale was concluded.

"You could have accomplished nothing. Espinosa keeps a close watch upon her himself, for, through the girl, he intends to wreak a terrible revenge on Mr. Morey. I have—— Here they come! They are searching for you, and my escape will soon be known."

A line of twenty men, each carrying a torch, could be seen sweeping up through the camp, directly toward where the little party was in hiding, and an immediate change of base was necessary if Dale and his friends wished to avoid detection.

"I could shoot half a dozen down before they could

learn where we are," the boy said, as he fingered the trigger of his rifle nervously.

"Don't do anything of the kind!" Barstow cried. "They would get the best of us in a fight, and it is only by working secretly that we can hope to free Miss Nina."

This argument was sufficient to induce Dale to lay down his weapon, and Eph said, as he rose to his feet:

"It strikes me that we've got no more than time to get out of this. They are coming straight up the hill, and in ten minutes we shall be too late."

Even now one of the ponies might betray them, and Barstow showed that he was fully sensible of that fact by standing near the animals' heads to keep them quiet.

Dale objected to beating a retreat; but he had already come near causing serious trouble by not following his companions' advice, and could not afford to take similar chances.

There was no time to form any plan of action.

The Greasers were approaching rapidly, and the three started up the ascent, intending to wind around the hill toward the north after they were at a safe distance from the camp.

The retreat had but just begun when a loud cry of anger and surprise came from the outlaws, and Barstow said, hurriedly:

"They've found out that I gave them the slip. The fact that the lariat that held me fast was cut will show that some one helped me. You two had better mount and leave me to run my chances."

"What do you take us for, to desert a man when such

devils are at his heels?" Dale asked, indignantly. "We will get out of their way, if possible, but if they come too close, it will be a case of fighting for our lives."

Eph said nothing; but since he did not mount, it could be seen that he shared Dale's opinion.

Now the enemy were advancing more rapidly.

There was no longer any question in their minds but that they were being followed, and safety demanded that the strangers should be found.

Five minutes later it was no longer possible to continue the retreat on foot.

The enemy had extended their line until the hill was nearly encircled, and the little party were at that portion where there was no foliage to afford protection.

To advance a dozen yards farther would be to expose themselves against the sky, where they could be seen almost as plainly as at noonday.

"Now you must ride for your lives!" Barstow said, as he halted beneath the shadow of a huge boulder. "There's a possibility you can ride through the line, and I'll take my chances here."

Dale did not reply, but looked hurriedly around.

At this particular point were half a dozen big rocks, with sufficient space in the center to shelter twice as many as the fugitives could muster.

It was a natural fortification, and but for the absence of water might have been held against overwhelming odds.

"Come in here," Dale said, as he led the way. "This is

better than making a dash when the chances are that all would be shot down."

"We can't stay a great while," Eph replied, as he obeyed the order. "Once them devils know where we are, they'll hang on like grim death."

"It shall be death to some of them, and I only hope Espinosa will lead his men against us. I am willing to die if he can be killed and Miss Nina saved."

By this time the little party had no other alternative than to remain and fight.

The Greasers were so near that a man on horseback would have been riddled with bullets before he could begin a flight, and Dale said, as he handed Barstow his revolver:

"Take that, and don't waste a shot if it can be avoided."

"There's no need of such a caution," the man replied, grimly. "I only ask for a chance to pay off the debt contracted at the ranch, and every bullet shall go straight to the mark."

Eph was hobbling the ponies at the rear of the fortification, and before his work was finished, the battle had begun.

Two fellows, who were several paces in advance of their companions, came into full view, and Dale and Barstow fired, the reports of both weapons sounding as one.

In this case there was no waste of lead.

The Greasers dropped, one dead, and the other seriously wounded.

"Look out, they're going to make a rush!" Barstow

cried, and Dale had but just reloaded his weapon when the foremost came into view.

By this time Eph was ready to do his share, and the enemy were received so warmly that they retreated without firing more than five or six shots.

"I reckon they'll keep out of sight for a while," Dale cried, triumphantly, but Barstow checked his joy by saying:

"The next time they may have the upper hand. It is now known where we are, and some of the curs will go around the hill to the top, where they'll have a good chance to shoot us at leisure."

"We must guard against that. You fellows stay here, and I'll keep watch a short distance above."

"It's my place to do that," Eph said, as he laid his hand on the boy's arm. "Attend to this portion of the scrimmage, and I'll see to things up there."

Without waiting for a reply, he left the natural fort, gliding like a serpent over the bare ground until lost to view in the distance.

"How long do you think they'll try to keep us here?" Dale asked, when he and the ranchman were alone.

"Till all three are killed or taken prisoners. Espinosa is not a man who would tire or be frightened."

"We can make it hot for them, unless they get the best of Eph."

"Thirst will soon get the best of us," was the grim reply, and, as if to change the subject of his thoughts, Barstow added: "We haven't got any too many weapons. Those fellows laying out there seem to be well supplied,

and if you'll keep your eyes open wide, I propose to borrow what they have about them."

He referred to the dead man and the dying man who were lying a short distance away from the barricade in full view.

"The rest of the gang can't be very far off, and I'm afraid the risk is too great."

"No more than staying here with nothing but a rifle and a revolver between two of us," the ranchman replied, and before Dale could say anything more, he was outside the inclosure, keeping his body under cover of the foliage as far as possible while approaching the Greasers.

The boy watched every movement, almost forgetting that he should be on the guard against a sudden attack.

He saw Barstow leap like a cat upon the wounded man, and then there was a quick movement of his right arm as the Greaser's knife was buried in his own heart.

It was very like murder, but yet a necessity if the ranchman's purpose was to be accomplished.

Not a movement was made by the enemy as the daring fellow rifled the bodies of his victims, and crept cautiously back to the fortification.

"I reckon we're a little better off for that trip," he said, in a tone of triumph. "Two rifles, three revolvers, a couple of good knives and plenty of ammunition, ain't to be sneezed at by men in our position."

The weapons were, indeed a valuable acquisition to the besieged.

They were now fully armed, and could give a very good account of themselves in case of a sudden attack.

Dale forgot the seeming murder in his satisfaction at knowing how much better prepared than before they were now.

"If we could only get a supply of water in the same way, matters would look a good deal brighter."

"So long as there's no chance of that, we must make up our minds to know what thirst is before we're twenty-four hours older."

At that moment the two were startled by the sharp report of a rifle, apparently from above their heads, and Dale cried:

"They are coming, and Eph may be in trouble. Do the best you can here, while I join him."

Dale started at full speed up the hill, as a regular volley of rifle-shots rang out sharp and distinct on the night air.

CHAPTER VIII.

H A N D - T O - H A N D .

That Eph was contending against a large force could be told by the rapid discharge of firearms, and Dale ran at full speed, regardless of the danger in thus exposing himself upon that portion of the hill where there was no chance of shelter.

Now and then he could see a flash of light from amid a clump of small bushes, and this told him where the faithful fellow had taken his stand. Farther down the hill the burning powder told of the Greasers' location, and Dale understood that they were coming up rapidly, probably intending to make a regular assault.

Now Dale proceeded with more caution, although without slackening speed, and reached Eph's side just as the enemy broke from the cover in full view.

Taking careful aim at the foremost, the boy fired, and then drawing his revolver, continued to rain the bullets among the small party until every chamber was emptied.

"Good for you," Eph cried, as he reloaded his weapons, and peered out for a glimpse of the Greasers, who had momentarily halted, in face of the leaden shower. "I'd kinder got it in my head that they'd finish me; but your shots counted in great style."

The two were hardly in condition for defense once

more when the enemy again advanced, and during the next ten minutes a perfect fusillade was kept up.

From the rapidity with which the two discharged their weapons, it must have seemed to the enemy as if they were opposed by at least half-a-dozen, and when five of their number were disabled, they fled with the utmost haste down the hill.

"That settles them, I reckon," Dale cried, "and we have finished the fight with not so much as a scratch!"

"The ceremonies haven't come to an end yet," Eph replied, as he turned toward the fortification of rocks.

Then, for the first time did Dale understand that a battle was in progress on the other side of the hill, and from the cries of rage and triumph, it seemed as if the ranchman was getting the worst of it.

Eph had already started, running at full speed, and Dale followed him.

When they arrived at the scene of this second conflict, Barstow was seen inside the inclosure, trying to keep at bay a dozen men who were clustered around the entrance.

The new arrivals rushed forward with loud cries, but they came too late to prevent the enemy from gaining admission, and in a twinkling all three were engaged in a hand-to-hand fight against what appeared to be an overwhelming force.

What occurred during the next five minutes Dale was never able to describe.

He was conscious of discharging his revolver in the very faces of men when the distance was so short that their skins must have been scorched by the burning pow-

der, and then came a struggle with knives, in which ponies and human beings were mingled.

Cries of rage, groans and shrieks made of the hillside a perfect pandemonium, and over all hung clouds of smoke like some gigantic funeral pall.

The engagement was short, but decisive.

The coming of Eph and Dale at a time when the weapons of the others had been emptied, turned the tide of battle, and again the Greasers beat a retreat, leaving behind six of their number.

As for the defenders of the fortification, they had not escaped harmless.

Dale had a slight cut on the cheek, from which the blood flowed freely, while Eph had plenty of work trying unaided to bind up wounds on his leg and arm.

The ranchman lost an ear by a sweeping cut of a long Mexican knife, and appeared to be completely drenched with the crimson fluid.

Eph acted the part of surgeon to his companions, and did the work so expeditiously that in a comparatively short time their wounds were dressed as well as was possible under the circumstances.

"It was hot while it lasted," he said, as Dale in turn attended to Eph's hurts; "but I reckon the devils have got all they want to-night."

The ranchman, who, with a strip of blanket tied round his head, was searching the bodies of the dead and wounded, taking away the weapons from the last-named as a necessary precaution, since he found one trying to load a revolver with which to wreak revenge, added:

"I'll allow we can take it easy till mornin', but then look out for trouble. Here's one of the imps who counted on killin' us, an' I reckon he can give us some information that'll be of advantage."

"If he can he won't," was the dogged reply from the disabled Greaser.

"Very well, then, I'll waste a bullet on your worthless carcass, for we don't want sich vermin around."

"Are you going to kill him in cold blood?" Dale cried, as Barstow pressed the muzzle of his weapon against the fellow's head.

"Of course; we've got no use for him, and it won't do to let him jine the other devils, to tell how many of us are up here."

"What is the use of speaking, if you intend to shoot at the last?" the man asked, sulkily.

"If you tell me what I want to know, I swear that you shall live, so far as I'm concerned."

"Then you intend that one of the others shall finish me."

"Nobody will raise a hand against you, and when we leave, you can go free," the ranchman replied.

"But you won't leave this place alive. Espinosa has sworn it, and he keeps his oath."

"I give you my word that it'll be broken this time, and we shall have the satisfaction of helpin' him out of the world."

"He has too many men for you ever to get away."

"They are bein' thinned out mighty fast. At this rate there wouldn't be one left by mornin'. I reckon we've

done for fifteen or more, an' the fight has jest begun, with our side feelin' fresher than when we started in."

The man made no reply for a few seconds, and then he asked:

"What shall I tell you in order to save my life?"

"In the first place, how many men had Espinosa when you camped to-night?"

"Ninety-three, all told."

"That's countin' the three my friends wiped out on the trail, I reckon!"

"Was Jose killed?" the wounded man asked, eagerly, as he tried in vain to raise himself on his elbow.

"If Jose was one of those left to guard the rear, I am pleased at being able to inform you that he's been served as all such Greasers should be. The most surprisin' part of that business is that Espinosa didn't find it out before. Where are your gang headin' for?"

"To the chief's ranch in Southern California."

Barstow gave vent to a prolonged whistle, expressive of surprise.

"He's countin' on takin' a long journey."

"There is nothing to prevent. Since the soldiers have been withdrawn, it is easy to make quite a visit in the States. Have you any idea of following him?"

"That remains to be seen; but I give you my solemn word that the villain don't get off scot free this time."

"When Espinosa left his gang a few days ago, who did he travel with?" Dale asked.

"We met a prospector, who'd struck it rich, and the chief wanted to learn the location of the claim."

There was no longer any question but that the Greaser was the murderer of his father, and Dale felt as if it would be the greatest possible pleasure to meet face to face the villain, even though his own death should be the result.

"Do you know if Espinosa is countin' on callin' at any other ranch?" Barstow asked.

"It was arranged that we should be at Gordon's to-morrow morning; but the chief may have to put that visit off till you are wiped out."

"In that case I'm afraid he'll never go," the ranchman replied, with a laugh; and then, after removing the weapons out of his informant's reach, he beckoned for his companions to step aside where the prisoner could not overhear the conversation.

"It is time for us to make a move," he whispered. "You heard what that scoundrel said, and we must reach the Gordon ranch ahead of these devils."

"And leave Miss Nina in that Greaser's power?" Dale asked, indignantly.

"There's no help for it yet a while. We can't hope to whip the whole crowd, an' all that could be done would be to stay here while they do as they please. By morning we'll need water, and twenty-four hours later it'll be a question of surrendering rather than suffering."

"I would die before giving myself up," Dale replied.

"You have never been thirsty. The animals can travel now, while by to-morrow night they will be unfit. Ride to the ranch, put the people there on their guard, and we

shall have force enough to wipe this Espinosa out of existence."

"But suppose he does not go there? In that case we might lose his trail."

"Don't fear, my boy. He'll mark it plainly enough with blood and fire for us to ride him down whenever we choose."

"How far is this ranch away?" Eph asked.

"Twenty miles or more."

"There are but two horses; are you countin' on stayin' behind?"

"I shall get a pony before daylight."

"How?"

"There are plenty in the valley. When you ride out, I will venture there."

"And with these fellows buzzin' round like bees, there isn't much chance of gettin' off without a bullet in your hide."

"I must take those chances. Be guided by me, and try to leave here within an hour."

"I question whether it can be done," Dale said. "They are, as a matter of course, keeping close watch on the hill, and an attempt would only result in a running fight."

"I believe I can show you the way. Promise that you will take my advice, and thus do all that is possible to save life, at the same time we increase the chances of rescuin' Miss Nina."

"Barstow is in the right, lad," Eph said. "The best plan is to do as he says, an' then we'll have force enough to tackle the boss devil in proper shape."

Dale was not willing to leave Nina, even for a few hours, but he could not well refuse to do as both his companions wished, therefore he said:

"Very well, I will go, although it does not strike me as the best plan."

"Then mount, an' we'll be off," the ranchman said, as he went toward the animals.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ERRAND OF MERCY.

The prisoner watched intently the movements of his captors as the ponies were led out of the fortification, and Dale called the attention of his companions to this fact.

"It won't do to let him know what direction we take," he said, "for, if possible, we want Espinosa to believe we are beating a retreat rather than trying to continue the struggle with better advantage."

"I'll fix him," Barstow replied, as he went toward the man, and a moment later the Greaser's eyes were bandaged with a strip torn from one of the blankets. "He won't be able to see very much now, an' we can't help what he may guess at."

The ranchman's proposition was to ride down the hill on the side opposite the encampment, trusting to chance for getting away secretly, and in case they were discovered, to trust to the speed of the ponies.

It was not his intention to let his companions start very far in advance, as they soon learned.

When the horses had been led out of the inclosure, and all the arms, save a couple of revolvers which Barstow reserved for his own use, and the weapons carried by Dale and Eph, had been fastened to the rear of the saddles, he said:

"Now I count on leavin' you for a while. Keep right on down the hill, an' if nothin' perticl'ar happens, I'll meet you about a mile up on the trail to Silver City. Ride there an' wait an hour. If I don't show up in that time, you can reckon I've been done for, an' then go ahead as you think best."

"Why not keep with us on foot in the hope of picking up a pony somewhere on the road?" Dale asked.

"Because that would mean failure at the start. The only way is as I have said, an' I allow to fool these Greasers enough to get my pick of the ponies they stole from the Morey ranch."

Dale would have urged him to remain with them, but that Eph put an end to the conversation by riding on a few paces, and Barstow disappeared at once in the thicket on that side of the hill leading directly toward the enemy's camp.

"It was a foolish thing for him to do," the boy said, as he rejoined his companion.

"That may be; but this isn't the time to argue the matter. He knows better than we do how to outwit the rascals, an' should have his head. Our hands will be full tryin' to get through the line without a runnin' fight."

"If we could only meet Espinosa face to face I would welcome any kind of a row."

"Very true; but that scoundrel don't intend to give you sich a chance. He'll let the others do the heavy fightin', while he stays in the rear. They can talk as they choose about a Greaser's courage, but I don't believe there's any

sich thing, unless you get him in a corner, an' then even a rat will stand up."

It was not well to continue the conversation.

Already the two were descending the hill a little to the north of where the first engagement had been fought, and no one could say how near the enemy might be.

"Keep the bridle in one hand and your revolver in the other," Eph whispered, "for if we do get into close quarters, it'll be on the jump, an' we must ride ready for business at a minute's notice."

The sure-footed little beasts were picking their way through the bushes and over the loose stones as if realizing the necessity for silence, and their riders had nothing to do save watch the shadows around them for signs of the enemy.

More than once did Dale fancy he saw men moving across the path; but the moments went by without show of danger, until they were at the foot of the hill congratulating themselves on having gotten safely away in secret.

Then, from the long grass directly in front came what appeared to be a solid sheet of flame, and the bullets whistled uncomfortably close past their ears.

The shying of the horses at the flash probably saved the lives of both, and on the instant they were emptying their revolvers in the direction from which the shots had come.

"Now use your spurs!" Eph cried, as he set the example, turning the pony in the direction of the Silver City trail, and Dale followed at full speed.

Twice did the Greasers fire, but in the darkness, and with swiftly-moving objects as targets, it was almost impossible to hit the mark.

The fugitives got safely away, and the enemy, believing they were in full flight, set up a shout of triumph, but made no effort to follow, probably because their horses were on the other side of the hill.

After striking the trail at the point agreed upon, Eph drew rein, and said, as Dale rode alongside:

"Here's where we promised to wait for the ranchman."

"But there's little chance of seeing him again. Our scurry was enough to put the others on their guard."

"I reckon things couldn't have been fided to suit him better. It must have drawn off the attention of the rest of the gang, an' given him a chance to sneak away with one of the ponies."

Dale was not as sanguine.

He believed Barstow had been recaptured, and thought the time spent in waiting for him was wasted, when they should have been riding at full speed to give the alarm at the ranch where Espinosa proposed to make his next visit of murder and pillage.

"Do you know where Gordon's is?" he asked, after a long pause, during which both had listened in vain for sounds betokening that they were pursued.

"Indeed I don't, an' unless the ranchman gets away from them devils, we shan't do very much warnin', except somebody comes along who knows the country, which ain't likely."

Five, ten minutes passed, and just as Dale was on the

point of urging that they ride ahead, the hoof-beats of a horse could be heard.

"Now, the question is whether Barstow or one of them Greasers is coming," Eph said, as he drew his revolver. "There's only one, and if he's an enemy, we must stop him here."

In his short experience Dale had lost all repugnance at shooting at a human being, if it was a Greaser on whom he could draw bead, and he made ready to give the newcomer a warm reception.

When the horseman was nearly opposite, the two rode out from among the shadows, and instantly the voice of the ranchman was heard, as he cried:

"Luck was with us for a fact. The little scrimmage you had was just what I needed, and at one time I believed it was goin' to be possible to release the prisoners. Every mother's son of them was for joinin' in the row, an' but for Espinosa the whole boilin' would have been out here."

"I see you've got a pony," Eph said, with a quiet chuckle of satisfaction.

"It's one of Mr. Morey's, an' the best in the herd. What's more, I've got a dandy saddle and blankets. Was either of you hurt in the shootin' match?"

"It was too dark for much damage to be done; but we shouldn't sit here as if there was no business on hand," Dale replied. "Lead the way to Gordon's, for we must be in the saddle again before many hours go by in case Espinosa abandons his attempt to take possession of the ranch."

"I don't think there'll be much danger of that, but the sooner our journey is ended, the sooner we shall have help in rescuing Miss Nina."

As he spoke, the ranchman pulled his horse around at right angles with the course he had been pursuing, and set off at full speed, the others following as close behind as the abilities of their steeds would permit.

During the next hour the mad ride was continued without drawing rein, and then the ponies were so nearly blown that a halt was necessary.

"We're all right so far," Barstow said, as he slipped to the ground and loosened his saddle-girth. "The ranch can't be more than five miles away, and the Greasers are yet in camp."

"What makes you think so?" Dale asked.

"Because, before leaving I stampeded the whole drove, an' I'll guarantee they haven't been rounded up yet."

"In case they find the man we left on the hillside, an' learn from him that he told us where they were bound, Espinosa may conclude not to go there."

"Don't fear he'll tell that yarn, lad. The Greaser chief would kill him like a dog if it were known he'd given away any of his plans. He'll hold his tongue when they find him."

The halt was prolonged only about ten minutes, and then Barstow proposed that they mount once more.

"We must get there before sunrise, an' I reckon the ponies can stand another short stretch," he said, as he vaulted into the saddle.

The others followed his example, and in a few seconds

all three were riding among the foothills in the darkness where a misstep on the part of their steeds would mean an ugly fall, if not death.

It was yet dark when they arrived at the ranch, and the barking of the dogs brought out a sleepy-looking Greaser, who seemed very much surprised at seeing them.

"I'll eat my own head if that fellow isn't in Espinosa's pay," the ranchman whispered, as he dismounted, and Dale replied in the same cautious tone:

"Then be careful not to let him hear the news we've come to bring."

"Trust me for that. I haven't been in this section of the country so long that I don't know when to hold my tongue." Then, in a loud tone, Barstow said: "It strikes me that this isn't the best kind of a time to trade for cattle, but if we don't see Gordon now, there won't be another chance very soon, so let's rout him out."

Leaving their horses in charge of the suspicious-looking Greaser, the three went toward the main building, and in a short time were closeted with Mr. Gordon.

"I am not surprised by the news you bring, gentlemen," he said, when Dale finished his story. "We heard last night of the attack on the Morey ranch, and I had an idea this place would be the next visited."

"Are you prepared for them?" Dale asked.

"With the aid of you three, we can give them a warm reception."

"It would be better to muzzle that Greaser we saw, unless you are willin' Espinosa should know the full strength or weakness of the ranch," Barstow said. "I'm

bettin' my head against a prickly pear that he's on the lookout for the devils."

"I have had no cause to suspect him; but we cannot afford to take chances at such a time, and he shall be closely watched," Mr. Gordon said, as he left the apartment a moment to give an order to one of his stockmen.

The newcomers were liberally supplied with food, the inmates of the ranch were aroused, the Mexican put under strict surveillance, and every preparation made to give the expected visitors a hearty reception, which, as Barstow expressed it, "should induce them to stay forever."

CHAPTER X.

A PRISONER.

When the morning came the inmates of the Gordon ranch were ready to meet the famous Mexican outlaw. Every precaution had been taken to prevent him from suspecting that they had learned of his intended visit, and twenty well-armed and resolute men were waiting to strike such a blow as would avenge some of the Greaser's victims.

Dale was the only person who did not feel willing to wait a long while in the hope of administering the deserved punishment, and he was impatient only because, by remaining quietly there, it seemed as if in some way they were abandoning Nina to her fate.

He had urged Mr. Gordon to ride forth with his force to meet the murderer, but the ranchman explained the folly of such a proceeding.

The outlaws could readily retreat in case the battle turned against them, and might be able to do a great deal of damage to the ranch while its rightful protectors were absent.

"The only proper course is to wait here for him," Mr. Gordon said. "Then if he gets a sound whipping, the entire party can run him to earth and rescue Miss Morey. It would be useless to attempt any other plan."

With this assurance, Dale was forced to be content, although it seemed almost criminal to delay so long while she was in the power of the desperado.

During the forenoon nothing was seen to cause alarm.

The force which Mr. Gordon had gathered was kept under cover, for the purpose was to tempt Espinosa to make an attack, rather than frighten him away.

Barstow took it upon himself to watch over the suspicious-acting servant, and toward noon he reported that the fellow had tried to leave the ranch unobserved.

"Did you lock him up?" Mr. Gordon asked, angrily.

"No, sir; I'm givin' him every show, an' the next time he tries to make a break there'll be one Greaser less in this world."

At about two o'clock in the afternoon one of the sentinels announced that a body of men were approaching from the south.

Ten minutes later it was reported that a party was coming from the north, and in less than half an hour detachments could be seen advancing from each point of the compass.

"They are tryin' the same game as when the Morey ranch was attacked," Barstow said, and then his attention was attracted to the figure of a man creeping through the grass away from the buildings.

His rifle was at his shoulder in an instant, and when the report rang out, the Greaser servant leaped high in the air to fall back dead.

"I reckon he won't act as Espinosa's spy any longer," the ranchman said, as he calmly reloaded his weapon.

Mr. Gordon directed that one of the men ride out and drag the body in, lest the outlaw should understand from seeing the corpse that his visit was expected, and this had hardly been done when the newcomers were just beyond rifle shot, waiting for the word to advance.

Dale searched eagerly for some signs of the captives, but none were to be seen.

The Greaser was too good a captain to thus burden himself during a fight, and Eph explained:

"They've left the women an' men under guard a few miles off. If we could get out of this place, it might be an easy matter to set them free."

"Then you admit that I was right in not wanting to remain here until it was too late to leave," Dale replied.

"Indeed I don't do anything of the kind, lad. Them beauties have scoured the country for a dozen miles around before closin' in, an' if we'd waited for a chance to attack the camp, the whole crowd would have come at us in the open, where we'd have precious little hope of anything save dyin' like men."

The Greaser now gave the signal to advance, and as his men closed around the ranch, a member of the party, waving a white cloth, rode within hailing distance.

More than one of the stockmen who were concealed in the building, insisted that the messenger should be shot down, regardless of the flag of truce; but Mr. Gordon would not listen to the proposition.

"I know Espinosa is a murdering villain, but that won't excuse us for killing the man who comes unarmed," he said, and then stepped out to listen to the message.

The bearer of the flag lost no time in informing the owner of the ranch whom it was who had thus come in force, and concluded by promising that the lives of all who surrendered at once should be saved.

As a matter of course there was but one reply to such a summons, and Mr. Gordon sent word to the chief of the gang that in the future no flag of truce would be respected.

"Armed or unarmed, we shall kill the first who approaches within range," he said, "and you will be allowed no more than time to ride at your best pace back to the villain who sent you."

The man wheeled his pony sharply around, sank the spurs deep in his flanks, and was off like a shot.

"The time for fighting has come, boys," the owner of the ranch said, as he took up his station at the heavily-barred and shuttered window, through which loopholes had been made. We have got ammunition enough, but at the same time it isn't well to waste a cartridge. Remember what will be the fate of those who are so unfortunate as to fall into that rascal's clutches."

There was no reply to this speech, nor was any needed.

The room was filled with men who had literally taken their lives in their hands many times, and a duel to the death was not so rare as to cause any show of fear.

Dale was the only person who did not at least appear to be fully at ease, and his agitation came from the thoughts of Nina, rather than fear for himself.

It seemed to him that by remaining at the ranch they

had lost all chance of rescuing her, when liberty just now might enable them to effect so much.

In one of the rooms of the main building were horses sufficient to mount the entire party, and these were saddled and bridled ready for a *sortie*, in case it should be advisable.

Espinosa's men came down upon the ranch like a whirlwind, evidently believing there was a traitor in the place who would devise some means of giving them the advantage, but their comrade was lying on his back in the open air, all unmindful of the work to be done.

By this failure in the elaborately-laid plans, the only result of the charge was the emptying of half-a-dozen saddles, without any injury having been done in turn, and the Greasers drew off beyond range once more.

"They are tryin' to make out what has become of their pal," Barstow said, with a chuckle. "It kinder puzzles 'em because he hasn't begun work. At our ranch the outer buildings were fired when the first dash was made, and the scoundrel who did it got off scot-free."

Espinosa did not care to make another attempt immediately.

After consulting together a few moments, the entire party dismounted, and Mr. Gordon said:

"They intend to lay low until nightfall, when the houses can be burned."

"That is if we let them," one of the party replied. "Are we to wait their time, or shall we go after them? Every man in this room ought to be good for at least three Greasers, an' that gives the odds in our favor."

This seemed to voice the sentiments of all, but Mr. Gordon was opposed at first to the plan, fearing lest Espinosa might be setting some trap for them; but when Dale's party assured him that the Greasers numbered but ninety-three after leaving the Morey ranch, and not less than fifteen of them had been killed or disabled, he finally gave a reluctant consent.

"Let us ride close together, and make certain that they don't get between us and the ranch," he said. "After emptying our weapons, it will be better to come back at once, for if those scoundrels gain a foothold here, leaving us on the outside, things will look tough."

Each man examined first his weapons and ammunition belt, and then his saddle, for on the strength of a girth depended the life of the rider.

Dale and Eph were quite as eager as the others to try conclusions immediately, and the former was one of the first to mount.

Two men were to be left behind to guard the buildings, and when Mr. Gordon gave the word, they flung open the wide doors.

Then, from out the house dashed a resolute party at full speed, Mr. Gordon and Barstow leading the advance, and so rapid were their movements that the shooting began before the Greasers were in the saddle.

Each selected his target, and the enemy fell on every hand, but the ranchmen did not escape unharmed.

Dale saw the horseman next to him reel for an instant in the saddle and then fall headlong, while in different parts of the ranks were evidences of severe wounds.

Unfortunately, Mr. Gordon's orders to fall back on the buildings after emptying the weapons were unheeded.

The ranchmen's blood was up, and they continued the fighting, as if delighting in such work.

All in vain did Mr. Gordon shout to them to beat a retreat. The crack of the weapons and the shrill neighing of the wounded ponies drowned his words.

Fully fifteen minutes elapsed before a man thought of retiring, and then a retreat was begun only because it could be seen that the Greasers were doing their best to reach the ranch in advance.

Now all were bent on the same maneuver, and the return was made as rapidly as the charge had been executed.

Dale was among the last, his horse having been outdistanced by the others, but he did not think of danger until half way back to the house, when his pony leaped forward, and then swerved to and fro.

The poor beast had been struck by a bullet intended for his rider, and before Dale had time to cry out, he fell headlong to the ground.

The shock stunned Dale, and when he recovered consciousness his companions had disappeared, while one of Espinosa's gang was bending over him.

He leaped to his feet only to receive a blow from the butt of a revolver, which knocked him senseless again, and the Greaser threw him over the pommel of his saddle, much as if the boy had been a sack of grain.

Eph had just dismounted, and was looking through one of the loopholes when the man carried Dale away at full speed.

The faithful fellow would have rushed out to aid his friend, or share his captivity, but the others held him back, Mr. Gordon saying, sternly:

"None but a crazy man would venture there alone. You would only be going to your death; remain here, and before nightfall we may whip them. Then will be the time to make a rush for your friend."

CHAPTER XI.

WITH THE GREASERS.

When Dale realized his situation, he was being carried at full speed by his captor, the stride of the pony causing him almost intolerable pain, while his head hung nearly on a level with the rider's feet.

He could not have struggled, although assured that the exertion would result in his release; his brain seemed full to bursting with blood, and everything he gazed upon appeared to be of the same sanguinary color.

The Mexican rode with his prisoner to where the chief was directing the movements of his men, and there, tumbling the boy off unceremoniously, spoke a few words in Spanish.

Espinosa answered in the same language, and apparently gave some order to the man who had brought in the captive, for the fellow dismounted, and deftly fastened Dale's hands with his lariat, as he said, in English:

"You can walk now, I reckon, for I don't count on making the horse carry two. Keep pace, or you'll have an opportunity of trying the strength of this rawhide."

Not until later did Dale understand the meaning of the words.

"Where are you going to take me?" he asked.

"Hold your tongue, an' you'll soon find out," the man

replied, insolently, as he remounted. "Now come, an' remember that it won't be comfortable to hang back."

As he spoke he urged the pony forward, and Dale discovered that he was to be led at the end of the lariat.

In case he fell, the rawhide would serve to drag him, the Greaser having taken a turn around the pommel of the saddle, and the boy knew full well that his captor would like no better sport than to haul him along the ground two or three miles.

Why he had been made a prisoner instead of being killed instantly was more than he could imagine; but it was reasonable to suppose that Espinosa's cutthroats knew as much about torture as the most vengeful Indian.

The Greaser started suddenly, hoping to throw the boy down at once; but Dale was on his guard, and before the long length of the rawhide had straightened he was running at full speed.

"I can't expect to keep pace with that pony," he said to himself, "but I'll hold out as long as possible."

He was hopeful, although a prisoner in the hands of those who knew no mercy.

It was certain that Eph and Barstow, even though Mr. Gordon's following refused to lend assistance, would do all in their power to rescue him, and he must keep all his faculties sharpened to take advantage of the first opportunity to escape.

If his captor should succeed in doing him grievous injury, the inability to aid himself might prevent his

friends from accomplishing anything, and he mentally braced himself for the long struggle.

The Greaser urged his pony forward at the rate of about six miles an hour, and Dale might have kept pace with him readily for a short distance had his hands been free, but thus hampered in his movements it required every effort to remain on his feet.

During the first ten minutes he was jerked violently forward half a dozen times, but managed to prevent himself from falling headlong, and then the Greaser pulled up.

Dale hoped the painful journey had come to an end, but it seemed that his captor was only trying to get more enjoyment out of what he considered sport.

"I will give you a chance to breathe," he said, with a malicious grin, "for when we start again you shall see how fast the pony can travel."

"If you weren't a coward, you'd give me a fair chance," Dale replied, speaking with difficulty, owing to his rapid breathing.

"What do you want?"

"Put the lariat around my waist, and I can keep on my feet."

"It makes little difference to me whether you are on your head or your heels when we strike the camp."

The halt lasted three or four minutes, and then the Greaser started the pony suddenly again; but, as before, Dale was on his guard.

It was impossible, however, that he could keep pace with the horse when the animal was forced to his best

speed, and, despite all his efforts, he was thrown headlong.

In falling, he contrived to grasp the lariat with both hands, and thus was able to hold the strain from coming directly on his wrists as he was pulled violently over the rough surface.

It was evident that the Greaser did not wish to kill his prisoner outright, for, after dragging Dale fifty or sixty yards, he reined in his horse, thus allowing the boy to regain his footing. His face and hands were bleeding from the many cuts and scratches, while his clothing was almost in tatters; but he made no complaint.

To show signs of suffering at such a moment would be to please his captor, and the thought of this was sufficient to keep him silent.

The Greaser waited an instant, as if hoping to hear some plea for mercy, and then started on once more, this time riding at such a pace as Dale could follow without much difficulty.

Half-an-hour later the two arrived at the temporary encampment, where the prisoners from the Morey ranch were guarded by six or eight men, each one disabled by some wound received during the fight on the hillside.

Weary and nearly exhausted though Dale was, he thought of the young girl he had been trying to save rather than of his own condition, and, while the Greaser bound him to one of the other captives, he searched the place with his eyes.

It was not many minutes before he saw that for which he sought.

A short distance away, half-hidden by the high saddle against which she was half-leaning, half-reclining, was the poor girl, her attitude expressive of the deep sorrow which had come upon her.

Dale could see a portion of her face, and thought he had never looked upon features so beautiful, tear-stained and drawn with mental suffering though they were.

Not for some time after the new prisoner was brought in did she appear to be conscious of his presence, and then the boy's bleeding face, irritated by swarms of flies and gnats, aroused her sympathy.

Filling a pot with water from the stream near by, she approached Dale, saying:

"Are you badly wounded?"

"No, indeed, thank you. That Greaser dragged me quite a distance, and I got scratched considerably, that's all."

"Where were you taken prisoner?"

"Near the Gordon ranch."

"Have the fiends destroyed that also?"

"They tried to, but we managed to give the alarm in time."

"What did you know about it?"

"One of the fellows who were wounded while we were fighting on the hillside was induced to tell us Espinosa's plans."

"Were you among the brave men who held these robbers in check so long?" Nina cried, excitedly, and began washing the blood from Dale's face as if to distinguish more clearly his features.

"I don't know that I was so very brave, but I was one of the party," Dale replied, feeling conscious that but for the dust and blood on his face Nina could see his blushes.

"How large was your force?"

"Eph Minot and I made up the entire army until we got Barstow free, and then we had a full regiment of three," Dale said, assuming a careless tone which was far from natural.

"Did you two attempt to attack this band of robbers alone?"

"We did, for a fact, and I think it was a pretty good try, by the looks of these fellows with bandages."

"There were very many wounded, and Espinosa swore that he would burn at the stake those who had dared to attack him."

"I don't reckon the scoundrel knows who we are, therefore I can count on being treated like those who were captured at your home."

Nina shuddered at the thought of the torture to which the poor wretches were doomed, for she had heard Espinosa's plans; but she did not repeat them, for in such a case ignorance was bliss as compared with the anticipation which the prisoners would suffer if the truth were made known.

"How did you chance to make the attack?" she asked, after a brief pause.

"In the hope of rescuing you," Dale replied, and then he told the story of the past few days, beginning with the murder of his father, and all the incidents down to the time of his capture.

While he was talking, Nina had been dressing his wounds as well as possible with the limited means at her disposal, and when the narrative was concluded she bent over and kissed one of his lacerated hands as a means of showing her gratitude.

The touch of her lips thrilled Dale as a mild application of electricity might have done, and his face reddened with pleasure.

"You are very brave," she said, in a low tone.

"Any one would be when he knew you were in danger," was the gallant reply, and then, as if fearing he had spoken too plainly, the boy asked:

"How does it happen that you are free to move about the camp?"

Now it was Nina's turn to blush.

"Espinosa swears that I shall be his wife, and thinks I may be a more willing victim if he allows me a certain amount of freedom."

"And you will consent?"

"I? A hundred deaths would be preferable, and I have the means of thwarting him."

"How?"

"With this," and the young girl drew from the bosom of her dress a small revolver. "I found it among the things which were stolen from my home. When there is no longer any hope of rescue, I shall use it."

"And you would be doing right," Dale replied, in a low tone, much as one uses when speaking in the presence of the dead. "I do not think you should despair, however. Eph and Barstow will follow these devils as

soon as it is possible to leave the Gordon ranch, and there ought to be men enough there to make up a large force. Each engagement now weakens Espinosa's gang to a certain degree, and if he can be prevented from a rapid retreat, all must soon be well."

"Heaven grant it may be so, but I cannot feel there is any good reason for hope."

"Do you think it would be possible for you to cut this rawhide after dark?"

"I will try, and also search for a weapon with which you can defend yourself when the supreme moment comes; but I am closely watched, despite my apparent freedom, therefore it may be some time before anything can be done."

CHAPTER XII.

ESPINOSA.

Nina hurried away from Dale after making the promise, for the sentinels were regarding her with anything rather than friendly glances, and it was in the highest degree necessary to avert suspicion.

Already had she talked too long with the prisoner, but to Dale it seemed as if time had never flown so fast before, and when she walked away his thoughts were regarding her loveliness of face and form rather than his own imminent danger.

Thanks to her ministrations, he was not suffering much bodily discomfort save that caused by the bonds, and it was possible to lessen this somewhat by moving in unison with his fellow-prisoner.

The man to whom he was bound was, as a matter of course, one of the prisoners from the Morey ranch, and when Nina left them he said:

"It has been a world of comfort to the poor girl, this seeing you, though I'd rather she missed the satisfaction of knowing what was being done for her, an' you was safe out of Espinosa's clutches."

"I'm willing to admit that I had rather be somewhere else, but it is well worth considerable suffering to have known her."

"It's easy to see that you haven't heard much about this devil's imp. It's more than suffering we shall know before biddin' him good-by. Torture's the word—torture to the death."

"But surely, man, we ought to get out of here. Four of us could do work among this disabled gang if Miss Nina should succeed in getting us free."

"There's no hope of that. She tried when you were having a set-to on the hill, but some of the gang are on watch all the time. Then again, suppose she did do it, what would we amount to without weapons?"

Dale was forced to admit that a general delivery of the prisoners was an impossibility under the circumstances, even though they were guarded only by wounded men; but he had not lost hope of being rescued.

"Eph will never stop trying so long as he knows I'm alive."

"And you can count on Barstow as well."

"Then let us make up our minds that we shall soon be in condition to square accounts."

"I'm afraid the time is too short. Espinosa will never take us with him if he reckons on makin' the trip to Southern California, an' we can figure on bein' taken in hand by the devils between now an' sunrise."

"Unless they are completely wiped out by those who are defending the Gordon ranch."

"Don't build too much on that, stranger, for these Greasers never stand up long enough for such a thing to happen. If they find they're gettin' the worst of it the

whole gang will turn tail. Here comes some of the imps, an' I allow the fight is over."

Turning his head slightly, Dale could see half a dozen horsemen coming into camp as if in full flight, and a moment later the sentinels were passing to and fro rapidly making preparations for defense.

"They have been whipped!" Dale cried, excitedly, "and our friends are in pursuit!"

This seemed a reasonable conjecture, more especially when other members of the gang rode into the camp with panting ponies as if the chase had been sharp.

"That's Espinosa, the fellow on the spotted horse," the ranchman said, as the leader dismounted. "Isn't he a cheerful-lookin' customer?"

Dale gazed long and earnestly at the murderer of his father, trying to imprint the fellow's features on his mind, that he might recognize him in the future.

The celebrated outlaw was not a man who would attract much attention in a crowd.

He was small of stature, like the majority of Mexicans, with sharp features, a swarthy complexion, and a long scar on his face, which told of the duel with knives when the man had stood single-handed against three antagonists, killing all in less than ten minutes.

"He ain't a coward if he is a cur," the ranchman said, noticing that Dale was regarding the bandit eagerly. "When he came out of the duel it is said he was cut up like a piece of beef, but before the wound healed he killed an American who called to see him."

"What was that for?"

"He claimed to have done it for sport. He had been in the house so long that he was afraid of getting out of practice unless something of the kind was done."

"Wasn't he arrested?"

"I never heard of anything bein' done. The Mexican authorities seemed to be afraid of him, an' they have good cause."

"No matter how much of a terror he is to others, the time shall come when I will square accounts, and then his career will be cut short."

"Better men than you have tried to settle matters with that imp of Satan, and turned up their toes before accomplishing very much."

"It makes no difference. I will hunt him down until one or the other of us goes under."

"I like your pluck, my boy, but just now you are in his power, and the chances of getting free look mighty slim about this time."

Dale made no reply, for at this moment the Greaser went toward Nina, doffing his sombrero gallantly, and forcing her to listen to his words.

The girl tried to avoid him, but in vain, and Dale was almost beside himself with rage as he saw the expression of anxiety and fear on her face.

It was evident that the outlaws feared an immediate attack, for as soon as Espinosa finished whatever he had to say to Nina, he gave certain orders which resulted in a different formation of the camp.

The prisoners, including Nina, were placed very near each other, with the horses in a circle around them.

The men, shielding themselves behind the ponies, assumed an attitude of defense, while two or three of their number scouted about to give warning of the enemy's approach.

Nina was standing within a few feet of Dale, and whenever the chief turned his attention in a different direction she whispered words of cheer.

"They must fear that the men from Gordon's ranch are coming."

"Yes," he replied. "They got the worst of the battle, and it isn't likely white people would remain inactive while they know there are so many prisoners here."

"God grant they may be successful!"

To this prayer Dale breathed a fervent "Amen," and the two waited in anxious suspense for the first sounds betokening the coming of the rescuers.

In this they were disappointed.

One by one the moments passed until an hour had elapsed, and nothing was heard save the hum of conversation in the encampment.

"Can it be possible they intend to leave us to our fate?" Nina whispered, and Dale replied:

"That doesn't seem possible, yet they should have been here a long while ago unless the pursuit was abandoned."

At this moment Espinosa chanced to turn toward the prisoner whom he intended should be his wife, and saw her talking to Dale.

A look of rage passed over his face, as he came forward, and said, sternly:

"I shall regret being forced to deprive you of the liberty

of the camp, Nina, but it must be done if you persist in holding any communication with the prisoners. Remain where I told you. Who is this fellow?"

"A boy I hauled in, captain," one of the men cried, with a laugh. "I thought it might be convenient to keep him a while, and, besides, it was a clear saving of a cartridge. He is the one I brought to you on the plain."

"I remember," Espinosa replied, as he came nearer Dale and gazed at him, searchingly. "Who are you?"

"The son of the prospector you murdered in Silver City," Dale said, fearlessly, as he looked his captor squarely in the eyes.

Again the angry flush passed over Espinosa's face, and he cried sharply:

"You speak like one who is eager to die; do not be impatient, for that time shall come to-night, and we will hope you have nerve enough to live until my men get tired of the sport."

"I have heard that you prefer murdering those who are defenseless rather than meeting a man on equal terms."

"So you fear the torture, and try to provoke me into killing you quickly! How did you come here?"

"Your fellow just told you."

"Do you live at the Gordon ranch?"

"I never saw the place until last night."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to hunt you down, and if you don't succeed in wiping me out before morning, I shall live to wipe you out."

Nina tried to prevent Dale from speaking so boldly by

both gestures and looks, but he gave no heed to the signals. It was probable the Greaser would murder him, but he intended to speak without fear.

The declaration appeared to please Espinosa mightily. He laughed heartily, and asked:

"Well, what do you propose doing? You have not only hunted me down, but found me. Is that all you wish?"

"I am powerless now, but my turn will come, Espinosa. You shall not escape the penalty for your crimes."

"That sounds very well, Gringo, but I intend to let my brave fellows enjoy themselves with you this evening, and when they have finished there will be no 'turn' for you."

"I shall be avenged."

Dale spoke so positively that the Greaser fancied there must be a hidden meaning in the words, and he asked, sharply:

"So you are expecting your friends will come?"

"I expect nothing now, but I know your time is short."

"That may be, but I shall die with my boots on when the end comes, and you won't have that satisfaction. Pedro!"

"Yes, captain," the man replied, as he came forward.

"This is your prisoner. See to it that he furnishes you some sport to-night. Do not play with him too long, for the breath must be out of his carcass before sunrise."

"Are we to have only one, captain?"

"You may take all the men. There will be time

enough to decide who shall have the women when we are at the ranch."

"When may we begin?"

"At sunset."

The fellow walked away to tell the news to his companions, and Espinosa approached Nina.

"You have made nothing by your bold talk," the man to whom Dale was bound said in a whisper, "and we are to suffer for the foolishness. There is no chance for us now, and these Greasers are worse than Indians when it comes to torturing a man."

CHAPTER XIII.

A NIGHT ATTACK.

Dale made no reply to the reproaches of his fellow-prisoner.

He knew perfectly well that it was impossible to effect anything by bearding the Mexican lion in his den, but yet he would not have had a single word unspoken.

If he were to die at sunset he had at least told the outlaw some wholesome truths, and, whether his prophecy came true or not, it would remain in the fellow's mind, causing him a certain amount of mental discomfort.

The rank and file of the marauding band hailed with loud cries of delight the information that the male prisoners were to be delivered up to them, and, with a refinement of cruelty, they at once set about making preparations for the torture in such a manner that the unhappy men could not fail to see every movement.

Espinosa remained at some distance from his band with Nina, and the fact that he forced the girl to listen to his words caused Dale more distress of mind than did the work of the men.

"There is a chance the force from Gordon's ranch will come in time to prevent these devils from carrying out their threats," he said, after a long pause, to his companion, and the latter replied in a hopeless tone:

"Don't build on anything of that kind. Now it is known Espinosa is here, the stockmen will stay mighty snug, an' we must make up our minds to taste of such a death as only these villains know how to bring about."

"A man can die but once."

"You are right, but to-night it will be many hours before the breath leaves our bodies, and an ordinary death is as nothing compared with what we shall suffer."

"How much longer would you have been allowed to live if I had held my tongue?"

"Perhaps the time would have come just as soon, but as long as a man is sound of limb he always hopes that something will turn up in his favor," the prisoner replied, listlessly. "I can't blame you, for your sufferings are bound to be worse than ours, if these imps know how to increase them. We are doomed, and it isn't right to lay the fault on any one who is forced to suffer with us."

This resignation was sufficient to reduce Dale to silence once more, and he watched the ominous preparations with a certain fascination which could not be resisted.

After a mournful half-hour, Espinosa was called to the outer edge of the encampment by one of the scouts who had just returned, and Nina took advantage of the opportunity to approach the unhappy prisoners.

"It is selfish of me to keep this when you need it so much more than I ever can," she said, as once again she pressed her lips on Dale's hand, and motioned toward the bosom of her dress, where the revolver was hidden. "I know something of what they will do with you, and shall give you the means of preventing the torture."

"Don't do anything of the kind," Dale replied, quickly. "Espinosa will understand who gave us the weapon, and you will be made to suffer. They cannot kill us but once, and we should have manhood enough to bear the suffering. Do not despair after we are gone, for I am certain Eph and Barstow will find some means of visiting the camp in the hope of saving us all."

It was necessary to bring the conversation to an abrupt conclusion, for the outlaw chief was returning, and both Nina and Dale knew what would be the result in case he saw them speaking together.

During the next hour nothing occurred to break the suspense of those who were so very near a painful death.

The men had made their preparations with a cruel ostentation, and were now seated around the stakes awaiting the time when the "festivities" were to begin.

"They are goin' to use us as targets," Dale's companion said, as he saw the Greasers cleaning their weapons. "It will be a trial of skill, and he who comes the nearest without hitting a vital point is the winner."

"Then we have some hope of dying quickly."

"Don't count on that. They are good shots, and not one will make the mistake of killing us outright. Such a thing would be a disgrace, and there is no chance of a mistake of the kind."

Slowly, but yet rapidly, the moments passed.

Espinosa kept Nina where it was impossible for her to as much as see her companions in misery, and they counted the seconds which intervened between them and death.

The sun sank lower and lower in the heavens, until he touched the line of the horizon, and the men came toward their intended victims.

"I reckon there's no need of waitin' any longer, captain," the fellow who had brought Dale into camp said. "The boys are afraid we sha'n't have time to do the work in proper shape."

"Very well, begin as soon as you choose, but take care that the business can be seen from this portion of the encampment."

Dale looked toward Nina.

She was bidding him a mute good-by.

The Greasers began to untie the doomed prisoners, but before the lariats could be cast off a shot was heard from the edge of the camp, and an instant later everything was in confusion.

"Hurrah!" Dale shouted. "Our friends have come, and these curs may not have time to play their game!"

Espinosa cocked his revolver, and aimed it at the boy, but before it could be discharged Nina struck his arm, and the bullet whistled through the air many feet above the intended victim's head.

Throwing the girl from him, the man was about to take deliberate aim once more, when from around a clump of bushes appeared a band of horsemen, each firing with marvelous accuracy into the ranks of the Greasers, and the chief was forced to forego his intentions in order to hold his men in position.

It seemed as if the alarm had hardly been given before

Espinosa's men were fighting for their lives, and in the turmoil and confusion Nina ran toward Dale.

"Now I can set you free!" she said, as she began loosening the bonds. "It is the only chance you will have for escape."

"We don't ask anything better," Dale replied, as one hand was freed. "I can ride a pony out of here, providing you will come with me."

"Two would be captured where one can escape," she said, watching the Greasers, as she worked at the tough knots in the lariat.

"I won't leave you here in his power."

"You must. By gaining your freedom now it will be possible to aid me, but all is lost if you remain."

"It is better to die together, than for me to leave you with that cutthroat."

"We should die, and one, perhaps both, may be saved if you continue in the chase. Remember that I am waiting for you, and come with a sufficient force to release me."

"It's only a question of bein' killed," Dale's companion muttered, as Nina assisted him at the same time she did Dale. "What's the use of gettin' riddled with bullets when the fight may turn in our favor."

"Anything is better than taking chances of the torture," Dale replied, as his arms were free, and he finished the work by releasing his lower limbs. "If you will trust yourself to me, Miss Nina, I'll take you through the lines of this crowd."

"It is better that one should escape than both be killed,"

she replied, "and it is not possible a pony carrying two could get out of range before they would hit him. I depend upon you to set me free, but this is not the time."

"I can't go while you are——"

"Don't argue now when every moment is precious. If you have any regard for me do as I wish."

She could have used no argument which would have had greater weight with Dale.

Terrible as it seemed to leave her in Espinosa's power, he felt that he must go, but it was with the determination that the fight should not be ended until Nina had been set free.

"I can't get you a weapon," she said, as he stood unshackled an instant before her. "Will you take my revolver?"

"No; keep that until the last, and I pray that you may never have reason to use it."

"There are many times when death becomes almost a pleasure. Do not linger here, for if Espinosa comes this way he will kill you."

Dale took the brave girl's head in his hands, kissed her on the cheek, and then, with a warm pressure of the hand, said:

"I am ready now, and shall come back, if only to die with you."

"We will both try to live," she whispered, and then, turning to Dale's companion, asked: "Don't you intend to go?"

"I'd rather take the chances here than attempt to ride through the lines where death is certain."

"It may be he is wiser than I," Dale said, as, crouching low to prevent the Greasers from seeing him, he made his way toward one of the ponies. "You will see me again soon, if possible, but whatever happens, remember that I shall never be very far away."

The fighting had now become hot, and in order to make themselves understood above the rattle of the musketry it was necessary for the prisoners to speak very loudly.

As to who was getting the better of the battle it would have been impossible to say.

The Greasers appeared to be holding their own, while the attacking party showed no signs of wavering.

Dale's intention was to ride out of the encampment from the rear, where only one man stood guard, and to this end he hesitated sufficiently to select a pony which gave promise of speed.

It was now a question of getting past the danger point in the shortest possible time, and the question of horse-flesh meant life or death.

Hobbled a few yards away was a dun-colored mustang who looked fit to run for the lives of all, and this animal Dale selected for the venture.

There was no time to saddle him, even had everything been at hand.

A bridle lay nearby on the ground, and this the boy seized, putting it in place on the pony in a twinkling; but, rapidly as he worked, his movements did not escape the notice of some of the gang.

"Look out, there! The prisoners are leaving!" one of

the Greasers shouted, and the words had but just been spoken when Dale was on the pony's back.

Striking the steed a vigorous blow, he bounded off at full speed, followed by a perfect shower of bullets sent at short range.

Nina expected each second to see him fall, but he retained his seat, and, before one could have counted twenty, had disappeared from view behind the foliage which marked the northern boundary of the camp.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN RETREAT.

The boy who was making his escape had quite as much to fear from friends as from foes.

In the darkness there was every reason to fear that those who were leading the attack would open fire when he came within range, believing him to be one of the enemy, and, owing to the tumult and excitement, it might be a difficult matter to make them understand who he was.

Instead of riding boldly out among the assaulting party, he made a long detour in order to approach from the rear, and by this maneuver came directly upon Eph, who had fallen back to get a fresh supply of cartridges.

"Halt! and up with your hands! Quick!" he shouted, as Dale emerged from the gloom.

"Don't you know me, Eph?" the boy cried, instinctively cowering before the leveled rifle.

Eph threw his gun to the ground, and springing to the pony's side caught Dale around the waist, literally pulling him down.

The warmth of his greeting attested to the anxiety he had felt regarding his friend's safety, and he was so excited that several seconds elapsed before the honest fellow could speak.

Then he asked, releasing his hold sufficiently to allow

Dale to regain the breath which had nearly been squeezed from his body:

"How did you manage to give them devils the slip?"

"Nina did it. She's a jewel, Eph, and I had rather be killed fighting twice over than let that murderer carry her away."

"I don't reckon he'll have the chance. We are crowding his gang mighty hard just now."

"What are you doing out here?"

"Getting cartridges."

"Can you find a rifle for me?"

"There may be a spare one at the front, for half a dozen poor fellows have got through with theirs."

"Come on! We mustn't stop here talking, for every weapon counts now!"

Five minutes later the two were in the midst of the assailants, and Dale was receiving the congratulations of those whose acquaintance he had made at the ranch.

"There is plenty of work to be done here, my boy, so set about it at once," Mr. Gordon said, as Dale took a rifle from the side of a dead man. "Can you give us any information as to matters in the camp?"

Dale explained the general arrangements, but, as a matter of course, was unable to say how the Greasers were faring.

There was no further opportunity to ask or answer questions.

The enemy had begun a sortie, and every weapon was necessary to check the advance.

It would be impossible to describe the battle, which continued two hours longer.

Even those who were engaged had very little idea of what was happening save in their own immediate vicinity, owing to the darkness, and it was necessary each side should keep in close order to prevent the mistake of firing upon a friend.

At the end of this time the reports of the Greasers' weapons grew less frequent, and Mr. Gordon passed the word for all hands to be on the alert.

"They've got some deviltry on foot, and reckon to take us by surprise," he said. "Don't fire again until they come to close quarters. Barstow, ride to the rear in case they are moving around that way!"

There was almost an absolute cessation of hostilities during the next ten minutes, and then the rapid footfalls of horses told that the enemy was riding rapidly toward the south.

Espinosa had chosen his course in such a manner that he was out of range immediately after quitting the camp, and it was useless to send a volley after him.

"The devils are in full retreat," Mr. Gordon shouted. "Mount at once! Dale, Eph, and Barstow are to visit the camp in order to learn if any prisoners have been left behind, and the others will take to the trail! It is now a question of horseflesh, for unless we overtake Espinosa before daybreak we may as well turn toward home."

The order regarding himself was not received with any degree of pleasure by Dale.

He felt that he should have been allowed to remain in

the front rank of the pursuers, because it seemed as if his interest in Nina was greatest, but yet he did not hesitate to obey.

Each man sprang upon the pony nearest at hand, and as the main body rode out over the plain with a mighty rush, the three appointed to search for prisoners went toward the camp.

"Look out for yourselves!" Barstow cried, as they approached the place just vacated by the Greasers. "There's no telling how many of the imps have ridden away, and we may have a hot reception!"

A deep silence prevailed as the three entered the encampment, and picked their way among the lifeless bodies with which the ground appeared to be strewn.

The embers of the camp-fire were still glowing, and by aid of these Eph soon lighted a torch which served to illumine the gruesome scene.

No less than twenty corpses could be counted, but, unfortunately, they were not all those of the enemy.

Dale nearly stumbled over one whose nose and ears had first been cut off before the merciful bullet was sent crashing into the skull, and in the mutilated features he recognized the prisoner who had refused to accompany him on the flight.

"Poor fellow! He thought it was too dangerous to attempt an escape, and waited for certain and terrible death!"

Barstow found the remainder of the male prisoners taken from the Morey ranch, all disfigured in every manner suggested by the fiendishness of the Greasers.

The unfortunate men had been left behind, but even in the short interval when the fighting had ceased the brutal outlaws found time to torture them to death.

Faint and sick at heart Dale searched, fearing lest he should find the remains of Nina, but in this he was happily disappointed, although it remained an open question as to whether she would not be better off even to taste of the torture, providing death came quickly, than be carried away by those who knew no mercy.

None of the female prisoners had been killed, and it was not difficult to fancy why they had been forced to accompany the band.

"There's no use in stayin' here any longer," Barstow said, as he recognized the last one of his former comrades. "We can't stop to bury the poor fellows, for the living need us most just now."

"Can we follow the trail in the darkness?" Dale asked.

"That's what we must try to do, but if it isn't to be done there's nothing left but halt till morning."

"And that will allow the villains to leave us very far behind," Dale replied, disconsolately.

"What can't be cured must be endured, my boy. The trail will show up plain enough after sunrise, and we'll keep on it even if it take us to Espinosa's ranch."

"What a terrible thing for Nina!"

"She won't come to any harm while the devils are pressed as closely as they will be so long as Bill Gordon is behind them."

"But he said it would be no use to follow after to-morrow."

"Then we three must go it alone."

While this conversation was being carried on the little party had mounted, and Barstow gave the word to start.

"I reckon I've had more experience in sich work than either of you fellows, so I'd better keep a short distance in advance. Don't try for speed, because the trail once lost might require a long time in the finding."

During the hour which followed the pursuers rode at a rapid pace without drawing rein, and then it was necessary to halt in order to allow the ponies a breathing spell.

"So far there hasn't been much trouble in keeping track of the Greasers, an' I reckon we're gettin' along as fast as Gordon's men," Barstow said, as he dismounted, loosened the saddle-girths, and examined carefully the trail.

"How long since they passed?" Eph asked.

"Not more'n an hour, accordin' to my way of thinking. If nothin' busts, we oughter be alongside by sunrise, for I allow we're makin' the best time."

Dale had no questions to ask.

All his thoughts were centered on the hoped-for end of the chase, and every moment spent in the halt seemed like just so much time wasted.

He understood, however, that it was not possible to push ahead constantly, save at the expense of winding the ponies, and curbed his impatience as best he might until Barstow gave the word to mount.

"If we don't push 'em too hard, the hosses oughter hold out till mornin'," he said, as he leaped into the saddle.

"We'll ease up whenever there's a chance, an', by stoppin' at Howland's, get fresh ones."

"Is it some ranch you speak of?" Dale asked.

"Yes, the biggest in this section of the country."

"Won't Espinosa make an attack there?"

"I don't reckon he'll care to do anything of the kind, knowin' we're close behind. Most likely he'll swing around to the east over the foothills, where there'd be a chance of makin' a stand in case the ponies was winded."

Once more the advance was continued in silence, and the pace was not slackened to any appreciable extent until sunrise, when the men from Gordon's ranch were seen halted by the side of a small stream preparing breakfast.

"Their hossflesh appears to be in bad condition," Barstow said, as he gazed at the jaded animals. "There ain't much chance of them fellers followin' the trail before sunset."

"And in the meantime the Greasers are getting further and further away," Dale replied, mournfully.

"I ain't so certain of that. Ponies are ponies, an' you can't expect the best of 'em to travel forever. Most likely Espinosa's imps are haltin' this very minute."

The three were in the encampment by the time Barstow ceased speaking, and Mr. Gordon at once inquired as to what had been seen at the Greasers' last halting place.

Dale gave the necessary information, and concluded by asking:

"How long do you intend to remain here?"

"Till the ponies get their wind, say late this evening, when we'll strike back again."

"Do you mean to give up the chase?" Dale asked, in dismay.

"There's nothing else to be done. The Greasers have got a start they'll have no trouble to keep, and we couldn't overhaul them this side of Espinosa's ranch."

"But the poor prisoners! What will become of them?"

"It's tough, I know, but we've got no sight to do them any good now, and there's nothing left but to take the back trail," Mr. Gordon replied, in a tone which showed that he had fully made up his mind, therefore it would be useless to prolong the painful conversation.

CHAPTER XV.

HOWLAND'S.

Dale was nearly frantic at the thought that these men were to abandon the chase so soon.

He had felt confident Mr. Gordon would continue on the trail for two or three days at least before declaring himself beaten, and to return when it seemed as if the hunt had but fairly begun was a grievous disappointment.

Dismounting in a mechanical sort of way, he hobbled his pony where the grass was thickest, and wandered down to the stream to think over the matter alone.

Barstow, who knew exactly what was in the boy's mind, followed him, and said, when they were so far from the others that the conversation could not be overheard:

"It seems tough, I'll allow, lad, but there's sound common sense in what Gordon says."

"That may be, but there's precious little humanity in such a decision."

"There's where you're lookin' at the matter in a wrong light. The Greasers have got as good, if not better, ponies than we, an', barrin' accidents, I don't see any chance to overhaul them this side of Espinosa's ranch. While any one of these men would face death for the sake of savin' Miss Nina, they owe somethin' to their own

families. Gordon should be at home this moment, an' he's already done as much as Morey would under the same circumstances."

"Are you thinking of going back with them?" Dale asked, suspiciously.

"Not a bit of it, lad. I ain't lucky enough to own a ranch, or have any women folks to look after; consequently I count on stickin' to you until we down Espinosa, or he wipes me out."

"I should have known better than to ask such a question," Dale said, as he shook the stockman's hand warmly. "Eph will stay on the trail as long as either of us, and we three ought to be able finally to outwit the Greasers."

"It's a big contract you're takin', boy, for Espinosa ain't any fool, even if he does come from sich measly stock, an' has done up better men than any in this crowd, time and time again."

"Then we shall have all the more credit if he is outwitted by us. When shall we strike the trail again?"

"Not till late this afternoon. We ain't losing any advantage, for they're bound to take jest as long a halt on account of the hosses. Tell Gordon we want as much of an outfit as he can spare, an' we'll try to pick out the best ponies in this drove."

Anything was better than remaining idle, when it seemed as if each moment was an hour, and Dale went at once to the leader of the band, explaining what he and his companions proposed to do.

"Take whatever you want," Mr. Gordon replied. "We

shall carry back only as much as is absolutely necessary in event of an attack, and the remainder is yours. I know how you feel about our returning, but in a short while you'll begin to understand that we have no other alternative."

"Barstow has explained the situation in such a light that I cannot find fault," replied Dale. "With me it is different; I have a father's murder to avenge, and have promised Miss Nina to follow wherever that scoundrel may carry her."

"I wish you luck, my boy, but at the same time I feel that the odds are against you. Espinosa is not an enemy to be despised."

"So every one says; but if he were twice the fighter he has the credit of being, I should keep on to the death."

"I will try to select the best ponies, and hope your mission may be successful," the owner of the ranch replied, as the conversation was brought to an end by the announcement that such a breakfast as could be prepared from the limited amount of provision on hand was ready.

When the meal was finished, Barstow insisted that Dale, Eph and himself should get all the sleep possible, by lying down at once.

"We're bound to keep on the trail till mornin', an' whatever can be stowed away now is jest so much gained."

This was good reasoning, and the three were soon stretched at full length in the shade of some bushes, while Mr. Gordon was making ready the outfit they would need when the chase was resumed.

Not until late in the afternoon were the sleepers awakened, and then it was the leader of the party who aroused them.

"It's time you were starting," he said. "We've got a hot meal cooked, and you must tuck away as much under your shirt as you know how."

This summons was obeyed at once, and, while the three were eating, Mr. Gordon gave them some good advice.

"I've turned over all the ammunition and grub you can carry comfortably, for you're bound to travel as light as possible. Make a halt at Howland's if the trail leads anywhere near, and he'll replenish the outfit. Don't be rash; remember whom you have to deal with, an' when it comes to close quarters trust your wits rather than rifles."

Each member of the party had something to say, and, when the last bit of advice was given, the venturesome three were ready to begin the perilous journey.

The sun was about an hour high in the heavens when they set out, and Barstow led the way along the well-defined trail with as much confidence in being able to follow his prey as if the course led over a turnpike, with fences on either side.

A three-hours' ride, during which the horsemen halted only once, sufficed to bring them to the spot where the Greasers had encamped during the day.

The ashes of their fires were yet warm, thus showing that they had not been gone many hours, and Barstow said, in a tone of satisfaction:

"They started at about the same hour we did, an' there's been precious little time lost. We mustn't get too

near till we have more of a force, or stand a good chance of outwitting them."

"How do you expect to find any one to help us?" Dale asked.

"By runnin' across prospectors or stockmen."

"But if we keep at a distance, there's no chance of knowing whether they could be outwitted or not."

"I'm only countin' on hangin' back a day or two, till they settle down into the belief that we've given up the chase."

Dale shuddered.

Barstow spoke of days as if they were no more than hours, and he knew that Nina was eagerly watching for some sign from him to tell there was a hope of her release.

He searched the deserted encampment for some token of her, and was made comparatively happy by finding a bit of ribbon which he remembered having seen in her hair.

This he put carefully in his pocket when the others were not observing his movements, and many times during the next stage of the journey did he press the fragment of silk or the glove to his lips.

At midnight Barstow reined in his pony suddenly, bringing him almost on his haunches, and Eph cried, angrily:

"Look out, there! I came mighty near riding right over you!"

"That's the same way we would have treated the trail half-a-minute later," Barstow replied, as he leaped to the

ground. "See! the Greasers have turned sharply to the east, and, as I fancied, are headin' for the foothills, where they have a chance to make a stand if we press them too hard. Now is the time when they must be fooled."

"What are you doing?" Dale cried, sharply, as Barstow rode on, leaving the trail to the right.

"We may as well switch off to Howland's; it's only a couple of miles farther, and I know where the Greasers have halted as well as if I'd seen them makin' camp."

"But why do you go away from them?"

"Because we mustn't run the risk of comin' upon their sentinels unawares. It is possible we may find some fellows at Howland's who'll lend a hand, and, besides, when we start to spy out their whereabouts it'll be on foot."

Eph treated this divergence from the trail as a matter of course, but Dale was angry because of the delay.

He said nothing, however, for Barstow was the most competent to have command, and in silence the three drove on until the ponies stopped in front of a collection of buildings, the most prominent of which had a sort of stockade built around it.

The barking of dogs, together with Barstow's loud summons, aroused the inmates, and a couple of stockmen came out.

To them Barstow told the story of Espinosa's raid and the destruction of property, and concluded by announcing it as his intention to remain there until the following evening.

The little party was made welcome; but, to the disap-

pointment of the visitors, they learned that the proprietor of the ranch was absent from home.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Barstow said, when all hands were inside the main building and a plentiful supply of food had been set out. "We counted on gettin' a crowd of you fellows to help us shake the Greasers up a bit."

"If he is so near, the boys must stay to guard the ranch in case of an attack," the manager replied, quickly. "In Howland's absence, I wouldn't dare weaken our force, no matter how many prisoners they might have."

"Of course not; I understand that," Barstow said, and Dale was furious, because they had left the trail, even for so short a time, without other result than to learn it would be impossible to get assistance.

When the hunger of the newcomers had been satisfied, both visitors and hosts laid down to rest, but Dale found that he could not close his eyes in slumber.

There was ever before his mental vision a picture of Nina as he saw her when Espinosa insisted on remaining by her side, and this, together with the thought of what might occur while he was wasting his time, caused the keenest anguish of mind.

Cruel as was such a desire, he hoped the Mexicans would attack the ranch before sunrise, for then he would know their attention was, for the time being, diverted from their prisoners.

Nothing of the kind happened, however, and when the day dawned he was one of the first to leave the building.

A brisk walk in the clear, bracing air served to revive

his spirits in a measure, and an hour later came definite news of the enemy.

A cowboy rode into the ranch at full speed, with the startling intelligence that Espinosa's band were stealing and killing cattle in the vicinity of the foothills, and the manager of the ranch was forced to take some steps toward saving his employer's property.

"There couldn't have been anything better jest at this time," Barstow whispered, in a tone of satisfaction to Dale. "These fellers can't lay still while sich a game is goin' on, an' we may possibly have as big a company as will be needed to wipe the Greasers out."

CHAPTER XVI.

A RESCUE.

It was not destined that Barstow and his companions should profit by the news of the attack on the cattle as much as the former had supposed.

The manager of the ranch was a cautious man, one who would shrink at nothing if his own life or property was in danger, but timid to a fault so far as the interests of others were concerned.

Therefore, instead of mustering his entire available force to drive off the thieves, he sent half-a-dozen men, with strict orders that they remain near the herds, but to make no demonstration whatever against the enemy.

"Precious little good that'll do," Barstow said, impatiently. "If you are goin' to make your men lay low, the Greasers can drive every horn out of the State without raising an alarm."

"I suppose you think I should attack Espinosa; and so I would, if this was my ranch. But, in case we rode out, leaving only a small force here, and the buildings were destroyed, Mr. Howland would never cease to blame me."

"Of course you know your own business best," Barstow replied, as he assumed an air of indifference; "but, from what I've seen of the Greasers during the past few

days, I'll pledge my word Espinosa hasn't men enough to attack the ranch in case he was opposed by twenty good fellows such as you have here. It would be all he could do to stand up in front of them without thinking of dividing his force to make two separate fights."

The manager was not to be convinced by any such argument, especially when it came from Barstow, who, he knew, was eager for an engagement with the outlaws, and would stretch the truth considerably in order to gain his own ends.

A small force of stockmen was sent to guard the herds, and with orders not to be drawn into a fight if it could possibly be avoided.

Then preparations were made for defending the ranch, and it had been put into condition to resist a long siege when Barstow concluded the time had come for his companions and himself to make a move.

Dale was only too willing to bring this long spell of inactivity to a close, and Eph felt perfectly safe in leaving all the arrangements to Barstow's discretion.

The manager of the ranch was ready to lend the little party all the assistance in his power, save so far as such generosity might weaken his force, and he not only provided an ample supply of provisions, but gave them permission to select ponies at any time from the herd.

"You can always get them by coming back here, and, since it is certain Espinosa isn't more than a couple of miles away, it won't take very long to find all the horse-flesh that may be needed."

The saddles and bridles were to be left at the ranch,

while the ponies ridden by the three were turned into the corral.

Then the small party started once more to meet the Greaser chief, and this time there was every reason to believe an interview could be gained with but little difficulty.

Barstow was well acquainted with this section of the country, and set out directly across the wooded portion, confident in his ability to find the outlaw's encampment even during the hours of darkness.

"What's your plan?" Eph asked, when they were a short distance from the ranch, and the ranchman replied, with refreshing frankness:

"I haven't any. We'll go ahead and trust to chances; that's the only way I know of."

"So long as we are moving toward the villain I feel as if something was being accomplished," Dale said; "but this leaving trail to pay a visit here or there with no good result is enough to drive a fellow crazy."

"Then you'll be able to keep your mind in good repair for a while, because we're likely to see as much of Espinosa from this time until the matter is settled as the most greedy could ask for."

It was dark before the little party arrived in the vicinity of the place where the camp was supposed to be located, according to the information brought by the cowboys, and the advance became both cautious and slow.

Dale followed in Barstow's footsteps, with Eph bringing up the rear, and in this manner they traveled half-an-hour or more, when the distant glow of a fire warned

them that it might be dangerous to approach nearer until after making a careful examination of the surroundings.

"One can do it better than three," the stockman said, as he halted. "You two stay here, and I'll go on a bit farther."

"How long are you likely to be gone?" Dale asked.

"I can't say; but, in case those devils happen to get hold of me, I'll kick up such a row that you'll know of it without guessing."

He disappeared immediately after thus speaking, and Eph and Dale were left alone to await in anxiety and suspense his return.

Neither felt in the mood for conversation, which would have been dangerous while the enemy were so near, and during the hour which followed not a word was spoken.

Then, with such suddenness and distinctness that it caused both to leap to their feet in alarm, came a series of loud shouts or yells, followed by the reports of fire-arms.

The confusion lasted fully five minutes, and then all was silent as before.

"They've caught the poor fellow!" Dale whispered, as he gripped his companion's arm.

"That's about the size of it."

"What shall we do?"

"I reckon we're bound to lay mighty snug till morn-in', for I don't know the country hereabouts, an' we'd be as likely to blunder into the Greasers' camp as anything else. Besides, if he couldn't get on without bein' caught, what chance do we stand?"

"But we must try to help him."

"I ain't so sure of that under the circumstances. S'posen all hands should be lassoed, what would Miss Nina's hopes of escape result in?"

Dale was silenced for a moment, but not convinced that inactivity was the best policy.

He believed it their duty to run any and every risk for the sake of trying to aid their unfortunate companion, and it seemed almost criminal to remain idle at such a time.

He was silent for a few moments, and then said, in a tone of determination:

"I shall push on nearer, in the hope of seeing a chance to help him. He would not desert one of us in this manner."

"If you do I must go, too, for I won't leave you."

"Come on, then, I'll lead the way, and you follow close behind."

The glow of what he supposed was the Greasers' camp-fire could still be seen to guide him, and with this as the objective point he went steadily forward.

Moving with the utmost caution, the advance was slow, and after traveling about fifty yards it was seen that fully twice that distance would have to be traversed in the open, with nothing to shelter them from the light cast by the fire.

At this point the thicket ended, and the outlaws were encamped at the edge of a heavier growth of timber on the opposite side of the clearing.

"Most likely Barstow was captured or killed while trying to cross that space," Dale whispered. "You must wait here to watch for him while I go around."

"It will take you two hours to do that."

"Very well; we have the whole night before us."

Eph would have made serious objections against being left alone, but Dale prevented him by starting without further explanations.

Retracing his steps to the spot where they first halted, he circled out at least half a mile, in order to avoid the possibility of meeting a sentinel, and had just begun to move forward once more when the sound of footsteps caused him to halt very suddenly.

A huge tree near by afforded him ample opportunity for concealment, and hidden from view by its trunk, he awaited the approach of one whom he firmly believed to be an enemy.

To his great surprise he soon saw a woman making her way through the foliage with great difficulty.

For an instant the blood bounded through his veins as he believed it was Nina, but when she approached more closely that hope was dashed.

It was an older woman, and one whom he fancied looked familiar.

Without taking heed of the possible danger in thus making his presence known, Dale stepped forward as he said, in a low tone:

"Can I help you?"

The woman started in alarm and surprise, and, first crossing herself devoutly, asked in a whisper:

"Who are you?"

"One who would aid those who may be trying to escape."

"Are you Dale Wrightman?"

It was now the boy's turn to be surprised as his name was thus spoken, but he answered, after a slight hesitation:

"Yes. Where did you come from?"

"I have just escaped from Espinosa's camp. Miss Nina said I would find you near by."

"If you could leave, what prevented her from coming, too?" Dale asked, nervously, as he drew the stranger into the thicket, where both would be completely hidden from view in case one of the Greasers should take it into his ugly head to prowl around.

"Espinosa watches her himself, and she could not be out of his sight five minutes without an alarm being given. She has learned some things which it is necessary you should know."

"Is it important I should hear the message immediately?"

"There would still be plenty of time if I had not found you until morning."

"You surely do not intend to go back to that camp?"

"When one escapes from a fate worse than death they do not willingly return. I would walk until my feet were worn to the bone rather than take the chances of being again in the power of those villains."

"Is Nina safe from harm?"

"You mean is there any danger of Espinosa forcing

her to marry him? He will treat her well until the band arrives at his ranch, and then he swears she shall be his wife."

While they were talking Dale had urged the woman on in the direction where he had left Eph, and both walked rapidly, for it was hardly reasonable to suppose the enemy's scouts were lurking in the vicinity, since the boy had just passed over the same ground.

The knowledge that Nina was free from any immediate danger gave Dale the greatest possible relief, and he asked no further questions until they should be where a conversation could be carried on without difficulty.

The distance was traversed in a comparatively short time, and Dale halted at the foot of the tree where he had parted so abruptly with Eph.

No one was there.

He called him gently by name, but failed to receive any reply.

"He tried to follow me, and is either lost, or has been captured!" Dale said, half to himself, feeling that now indeed had all hope fled, since he was deprived of both his friends.

CHAPTER XVII.

NINA'S MESSAGE.

Dale's perplexity was great.

He could not imagine why Eph should have left the rendezvous so soon after his departure, and in case he had been captured by the Greasers, why had there not been some outcry?

Dale was wholly at a loss to know what to do, but it seemed positive he must make every exertion to find one or more of his friends before day dawned, and he said to the woman:

"Both my comrades have disappeared, and it is necessary I should search for them. Will you stay here alone half an hour?"

"Don't leave me! Don't leave me!" the woman cried, as she clung to him frantically. "Espinosa would have me tortured to death if he caught me now! I will go with you—do anything rather than remain here after you go. Besides, you must hear the message Miss Nina has sent."

"Tell me quickly."

"It has been decided to attack the nearest ranch to get more ponies, as so many of those stolen from our home have been used up by hard riding. Miss Nina asks that you give over trying to help her long enough to warn the poor people who are in danger."

"Is that the whole of the message?"

"She said: 'Tell him I know he will follow me to the end, and that sustains my courage; but if he fails he must not feel too much sorrow, for I fear the task is too great. Neither is he to risk his life in my behalf.'"

"I would die with her rather than abandon the attempt or arrive too late!" Dale replied emphatically. "How did you get away?"

"It was arranged with Miss Nina when we camped here that I should make the attempt. The women were not fettered, and when the opportunity came I crept through the lines. She, poor girl, has a sentinel over her every moment of the day and night, therefore what I might do would be impossible for her."

"When is the attack to be made on the ranch?"

"I do not know, but it is to come off before the band leave this place."

"How is their camp situated?"

"At the edge of a heavy growth of timbers, with a wall of bowlders at the back."

"Do you know how many men are left alive?"

"I can't say positively, but I should think there were not more than sixty, including the wounded. When shall you go to warn the ranchmen?"

"There is no reason why I should do anything of the kind. They fear an attack because of what the Greasers have already done, and are prepared."

"Will you not go there? Miss Nina wishes it that you may be out of danger during the fight."

Dale's face flushed, and his heart beat with pleasure at

the knowledge that she was thinking only of his safety, but that fact did not cause him to neglect duty.

"If there is a fight, I must be here; it is the only chance I shall have to rescue her unaided. Do you think you could find your way alone?"

"I would not dare."

"Yet you say anything is preferable to recapture."

"To go alone would be the same as if I walked deliberately into Espinosa's camp."

Dale used every argument to induce the woman to do as he wished, but entreaties or threats were alike in vain.

She refused to make even the slightest move without him, and wept and moaned in her fear, until he was literally forced to hold his hand over her mouth lest the outcry should be heard by some of Espinosa's sentinels.

He had good cause for perplexity.

It seemed to be his duty to attempt to aid Barstow, and at the same time something should be done toward finding Eph, while to leave the vicinity of the camp for the briefest time might result in losing a chance to rescue Nina.

The more he thought the matter over the greater was his bewilderment, but he finally settled the matter by saying sharply:

"If you won't do what you can to help your young mistress out of her dangerous position, I must spend as much time as is necessary to walk to the ranch."

"But it is to be attacked, and I shall be captured again!" she wailed.

This rejoinder, after he had decided to aid her at the

expense of the others, caused Dale to grow angry, and it was apparent in his tone as he replied:

"You can go there or stay here. In the latter case I fancy you will have all the danger that's desired, for it is my intention to creep up very near the camp before morning, and if I am discovered your capture will be certain."

The woman was silent for a few seconds, and then she said in an injured tone:

"I will do as you wish, but it is against Miss Nina's desire that you expose yourself to danger."

"If you make use of that to prevent my doing all that is possible to aid her I shall believe it was invented to secure your own safety."

"Indeed it wasn't. I only repeat her words."

"Then, if you have decided, come along, and travel rapidly, for I can't afford to be away very long."

He started through the foliage, and the woman was forced to follow or be left behind.

Dale walked at the best pace consistent with silence and safety, and, after a short time, it occurred to him that his companion might be able to tell him something regarding Barstow's fate.

"How long had you been away from the camp before I met you?"

"Not a great while; perhaps half an hour."

"Did you hear a disturbance, during which firearms were used, before leaving?"

"Yes, it was then Miss Nina motioned me to leave, for all the men were running around excitedly, and it was easier to get away."

"Did you know what caused the alarm?"

"No."

The attempt to gain information was a failure, and Dale relapsed into silence, not speaking again until they were within sight of the ranch.

It was some time before they could gain admittance to the main building, so great was the manager's caution, but when he was finally assured as to their true character the welcome was hearty.

In the fewest possible words Dale repeated that portion of Nina's message which referred to the movements of the Greasers, and told of the mysterious manner in which his companions had disappeared.

"Espinosa is not a man to be trifled with, and the fact that he has got hold of them should teach you a lesson. Remain here rather than insure your own destruction by continuing a task which is hopeless."

"It seems that the Greaser's name and reputation frighten more than his bullets. I shall go back at once, as I would if I knew certain death awaited me. You will give shelter to the woman, and be on your guard against the threatened attack."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"There is nothing possible while you remain here," Dale replied, and then, without further parley, he walked rapidly toward the encampment.

By stopping longer he might have said something very harsh to the man who was so exceedingly cautious when a young girl and two women were in the power of un-

scrupulous marauders, and it would not have been wise to make an enemy at such a time.

He found some little difficulty in making his way back to the place where Eph had last been seen, owing to his ignorance of the country, but finally succeeded, and stood trying to decide what the next move should be.

A profound silence reigned.

The rustling of the leaves in the gentle night breeze sounded with startling distinctness, and Dale was beginning to be influenced by the almost painful quietude, when he heard, or fancied he heard, his name called by Eph.

Starting forward in the direction from which the supposed noise had come, he whispered, eagerly:

"Eph! Eph! Where are you?"

There was no reply.

He walked cautiously through the foliage, describing a circle, one side of which approached dangerously near the Greasers' camp, but nothing was to be seen.

It was positive no one could be concealed sufficiently near to make his voice heard save by the most vigorous shouting. Again he stood as before, peering in the direction of the enemy's camp-fire, and once more came the whispered words:

"Dale! Dale Wrightman!"

This time it seemed as if he could have made no mistake.

Under other circumstances he would have been willing to swear that Eph had called him.

"What can it mean?" he said to himself, as a certain sensation of fear came upon him. "I'm sure the poor fellow isn't anywhere near, and, of course, there are no such things as ghosts."

The mystery chained him to the spot, despite the fact that he believed it necessary to get a glimpse of the encampment.

Ten minutes elapsed, and for the third time he heard the words in the same low, cautious tone.

"He has been wounded, and, unable to help himself, is trying to bring me to him," he said, as once more he began a search of the thicket.

Fully half an hour was spent walking around within the circle, and at the end of that time he knew beyond peradventure that his friend was nowhere in the vicinity.

The mysterious voice, for he now felt positive his fancy had not played him a trick, frightened Dale.

At tangible danger he would have advanced boldly without heed of his own safety, but the repetition of his name in a tone one could easily recognize as Eph's caused an undefined fear against which courage was as nothing.

"It's no use standing here," he finally said in a whisper, eager to break the solemn silence if by no other means than his own words. "I've got plenty of work to do before morning, and if the summons was meant as a warning from some unearthly source it can make no difference. A hundred ghosts shouldn't prevent me from trying to rescue Nina."

He started resolutely toward the edge of the thicket, intending to circle around as before in order to approach the Greasers' camp from the rear, when again his name was spoken, and this time the voice sounded like Barstow's.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ENCAMPMENT.

This time Dale did not stop, but continued on, convinced he had heard a voice from the other world, or that his nervous fancies had tricked him.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, it was but a short time before he was in the midst of a more tangible danger, which caused him to forget partially the mystery. After circling around the encampment as before, he turned toward the wall of bowlders spoken of by the escaped prisoner, and had not proceeded more than a hundred yards when the sound of footsteps, and voices speaking in Spanish, told that he was in the very midst of the Greaser sentinels.

If he had been able to understand their language considerable information of value might have been obtained, but as it was he remained in total ignorance of much which could have benefited him.

The men were moving to and fro amid the undergrowth, either searching the woods, or keeping a lookout for undesirable visitors, and from the number Dale heard at different times it seemed as if fully half Espinosa's band were on the alert against danger.

It appeared almost impossible to advance without encountering one or more, but yet he continued on, now re-

maining nearly stationary in the shadow of a tree, barely moving his feet in the desired direction, and again making a wide detour to avoid the men.

In this manner a very long while was spent in gaining a short distance, and the gray light of the coming day had appeared in the sky before he reached the desired spot.

He was now amid what might have been called a "thicket of bowlders."

The huge rocks were piled in every direction for a space of sixty or seventy yards square, forming a complete barrier against this portion of the encampment.

Horses could never have been taken among the gigantic blocks, and a man might only do so with the greatest difficulty.

"If Eph and Barstow were here it wouldn't cost an hour's time to drive those devils out of their camp," he muttered, as he selected a hiding-place where he would be sheltered from view, and yet be able to see all that was going on. "Three men could hold a hundred at bay, and finally shoot down the entire lot before the day came to an end."

He had a small amount of provisions, but no water.

The lack of the means of quenching his thirst did not cause him any anxiety, however, for he counted on being able to leave the place at any time during the hours of darkness.

With his weapons close beside him, his ammunition belt unbuckled for greater comfort, and in a position where he could note the approach of any one, Dale ate a

heartly breakfast while waiting for the gloom to be dispersed.

Half-an-hour later he had a good view of the encampment.

That the Mexicans were in an almost impregnable position there could be no question, and Dale realized that the manager of the Howland ranch had been wise in displaying so much caution.

Espinosa's forces would be able to hold out against quite an army, and in the meantime give good account of themselves in the way of sharp-shooting.

Having noted their strength, Dale searched with his eyes for Nina, and soon found her by following the chief's movements.

The poor girl was in the very center of the camp, under a shelter of boughs which had evidently been put up to shield her as much from the rude gaze of the men as the elements, with her head bowed in her hands in an attitude of despair.

"She believes I will follow the advice she sent, and now thinks herself abandoned. It wouldn't be a difficult job to throw a stone within a few inches of where she is sitting, and if I had the means of writing a note she should soon know I'm here."

For a long while he watched her, and then came the thought of his friends.

If they had been taken prisoners, and there could be no other cause for their sudden disappearance, he should see them now.

Eagerly he gazed toward the different groups of men,

and not until after a long and careful scrutiny could Dale be satisfied neither was there.

With the exception of Nina and the two women, he saw no one save the Greasers themselves.

Now the mystery was greater than ever.

If Eph was dead, his body must have been found in the thicket Dale searched so thoroughly, and yet the boy knew it was not there.

"Where could they have gone?" he asked over and over again, and, as a matter of course, the voices he had heard came to his mind.

It was impossible to convince himself they had been caused by nothing more than fancy, and after a time he succeeded in forming a theory which was by no means improbable.

"Barstow must have called, the same as when I heard the sound. Eph went to his assistance, and was struck down by a Greaser's knife. The two managed to reach some spot just outside the thicket, where I didn't dare to go, and there I shall find them. I'll leave here as soon as it is possible to decide whether the devils are going to attack Howland's immediately, and before I stop again the mystery of those voices shall be cleared up."

During the next hour he felt rather more relieved in mind.

The outlaws cooked breakfast, cleaned their weapons, or attended to the ponies, as fancy dictated, and then it became evident that some move was about to be made or discussed.

Espinosa left Nina's cabin, where he had been seated

smoking a cigarette, and, calling his men around him, walked to the edge of the thicket, when he spoke earnestly and energetically several moments.

The attention of the outlaws was directed toward their leader, or to that portion of the forest from which an attack might be expected, and it would not have been surprising if Dale could have made his way unobserved to Nina's side.

There was no possibility he would be able to return, however, and the thought was dismissed as quickly as it came, but leaving behind an idea upon which it was easy to act.

He had in his possession the bit of ribbon found at the last encampment, and, tying this around a small stone, he raised himself cautiously above the boulder to take aim.

Never had he sent a rifle bullet more accurately.

The missile with its unwritten message of hope struck within a few inches of Nina's feet, and rolled so near that she could pick it up without moving from her position.

For an instant the unhappy girl seemed at a loss to understand the reason of such a visitor, and then the truth flashed upon her.

She turned in the direction from which the stone had come, raised it to her lips, sent a kiss on the winds to the brave fellow who was watching over her, and never in his life did Dale receive so sweet a message.

It repaid him for all his sufferings and dangers. It rendered more steadfast his intention of rescuing her or of dying in the attempt.

"There must be a little comfort in the knowledge that a friend is near," he said, "and before many days I will find a means of doing a service such as will amount to something."

Nina remained gazing steadily in the direction of Dale, and he, watching an opportunity when the Greasers were particularly interested in the words of their leader, rose to his feet for a second.

A gesture of disapproval from Nina, and he was hidden from view, but she would know where to look for him in case there came a chance to attempt a rescue, which was, to his mind, ample reward for the risk taken.

Half-an-hour passed, during which Dale kept his eyes fixed upon the girl he had sworn to save, and then the meeting of the Greasers was broken up.

Espinosa came again to Nina, who turned her back on him, and the other members of the gang resumed their interrupted occupations.

"It is certain they don't intend to go to Howland's yet a while," Dale said to himself. "Most likely the devils are waiting to make sure no one is in pursuit. By staying here I shall waste the entire day, when it might be possible to find Barstow or Eph."

To attempt to leave the bowlders in broad sunlight was not a safe venture, but Dale believed he was warranted in taking the chances.

By crèeping from one rock to the other, keeping well within the shelter of each, he succeeded, after ten minutes or more, in reaching the side of the barrier nearest the thicket.

Here was a broad space over which he must make his way, with nothing to shield him from view.

Fastening the rifle to his side in such a manner that it would be dragged after him, he lay at full length on the ground, and worked himself along after the fashion of a snake, careful to shape his course through the thickest of the weeds, which grew in luxuriant profusion.

It was hard work, but he accomplished the task in less than an hour, and rose to his feet among the shelter of the trees with a sigh of relief.

Thus far nothing had been heard to betoken that the Greasers had any idea an enemy was in the vicinity, and he felt it was safe to make his investigations without the expenditure of so much time.

Walking rapidly, he traveled on until arriving at the spot from which he had heard the mysterious voices, and whispered loudly while pacing to and fro:

“Eph! Barstow! Where are you?”

Not for what seemed like a very long while were his efforts rewarded, and then he heard the ranchman’s voice:

“Hunt for a hole in the center of half a dozen bushes! We’ve fallen into an old mine, and struck the vein your father discovered!”

Dale could hardly credit the evidences of his own senses.

It was not so strange that a shaft should once have been dug in this place, but that it was the very one discovered by his father, and thus made known to both his friends by an accident, seemed almost incredible.

He was not so much bewildered, however, but that it was possible to find the opening after having the proper instructions, and in a short time he was lying on the earth, with his face over the aperture, talking to Barstow and Eph.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE OLD MINE.

"How did you happen to get in there?" Dale asked, as he tried in vain to peer down the dark aperture.

"I got hold of a Greaser, an' instead of shootin' the cuss, was tryin' to choke him to death to prevent any noise; but he proved too much for me till we'd knocked around considerable. Then the next thing I knew both of us was tumblin' in here."

"How did Eph find you?"

"I hollered as loud as I dared, an' when the fool struck the hole he insisted on comin' down to see what it was like. That settled it, for, of course, both are fast."

"Do you have any idea how deep it is?"

"Somewhere about forty feet, I should say."

"You'll have to wait till I can go back to Howland's for a lariat."

"Now you're here, we are willin' to hold on quite a spell; but an hour ago it looked as if we'd made our everlasting lump."

"What did you mean by saying this was the vein father discovered?"

"Because he's left somethin' that proves it. What time is it?"

"Early in the forenoon."

"Have you seen anything of the Greasers?"

"I just came from near their camp. According to the appearance of things, there isn't much show of a move before night."

"Then fix things so's we can get up, an' take a peep at your property."

"It might be possible to arrange some means of getting down without so long a tramp."

"I don't think so; we've spent a good many hours tryin' to figger it out."

"Then I'll go. Wait patiently, for something may happen to detain me; the Greasers are thick hereabouts."

"Have you got any grub?"

"A little."

"Drop some in; it's better to eat than stay here with nothin' to do but suck our thumbs."

"All right, stand from under!" and Dale let fall the small haversack in which he carried his provisions.

Up to this time Eph had not spoken; but now he said, mournfully:

"It's a big pity you don't smoke; I'm mighty nigh dyin' for a piece of terbacker."

"It'll be necessary to wait a while longer, for I don't carry such a thing. What beats me is how you got down there when Barstow told you the situation of affairs."

"He said it was the shaft of an old mine, an', fool-like, I allowed I knew how to get out."

"It was ten to one that he'd break his neck or mine when he came," Barstow added, with a laugh. "I thought he was at the top, when his carcass slipped

through the hole. Lucky the Greaser's body was here to break the fall, as it did for me, or Eph would be ready for a-buryin' now, an' a mighty ugly corpse he'd make."

"You know I've had a good bit of experience in mines," Eph explained, "an' I made sure there was a ladder on the side, seein's how I couldn't find the wreck of a windlass."

"It will be time enough for me to hear the particulars after I've been to the ranch," Dale interrupted. "I can't go there and back in less than an hour, so you mustn't grow impatient."

"It's all right now we know you're on the way," Barstow replied, and Dale hurried away, eager to be at the bottom of the shaft that he might learn what the stockman meant by saying it was the vein discovered by the murdered prospector.

It was necessary to proceed with the greatest caution, despite his anxiety to return at once, for there could be no question but that the Greasers were scouting in the vicinity, and he took precautions accordingly.

An hour was spent in making the two miles, and his return was hailed by the manager of Howland's as proof that he had concluded to abandon the unequal contest.

"That's where you make a mistake," Dale replied to the suggestion that he had tired of chasing Espinosa single-handed. "I still believe it will be possible to get the best of him. Just now I want a lariat from my saddle, and am going directly back. The Greasers don't show any signs of attacking you to-day, but I reckon you can count on seeing them some time to-night."

"We are prepared, and shall give a good account of ourselves."

"I only hope the fight will be so hot that I can see a chance of rescuing Miss Nina.

"It might be a good opportunity; but I allow he'll leave his camp well guarded."

By this time the defenders of the ranch had gathered around Dale to learn the latest news of the enemy, and an old stockman said, as he shook the boy warmly by the hand:

"You're plucky enough to be one of us, and I only wish that old man Howland was home, for then we'd show you how soon a crowd could be gathered to help rescue a young girl from them devils. Jest now we're too much afraid of bein' blamed for doin' the proper thing."

Dale understood that the stockman was saying this for the benefit of the manager rather than himself, but he made no reply, save by a pressure of the hand.

It was evident from the conversation that all, or nearly all, of those employed on the ranch, were eager to be led against Espinosa, instead of waiting until he should be ready to attack.

Dale explained that their camp could not be carried by assault save at an enormous loss of life, but this did not dampen the ardor of the men.

"We oughter have a chance to show what we're made of," the old fellow said, as he walked away, shaking his head angrily, and the visitor thought it would be better to take his departure rather than listen to the wrangling which could amount to nothing of importance.

Securing the lariat and another small supply of provisions, he was about to leave the ranch, when the woman whom he brought there insisted on attempting to learn something regarding her young mistress, and half-an-hour was spent trying to convince her that he knew no more than she herself could have told him.

Another delay was caused by the majority of the stockmen, who surrounded him apparently for no other purpose than to inveigh against the manager, and when Dale found it possible to break away from them it was noon.

"I can't wait a minute longer," he said, when the men would have detained him longer, and the words had hardly been spoken when one of the cowboys rode up at full speed.

"The Greasers are coming!" he shouted. "The whole crowd chased me a mile, and I only had a chance to invite two of the gang to stop."

"What was the matter that you didn't shoot any better?" some one asked.

"I didn't care about gettin' in range of the lot, an' so kept as far ahead as the pony could carry me. There they are now."

The alarm was not a false one.

Looking quickly in the direction pointed out by the newcomer, Dale saw the full force of Greasers riding at their best pace, and he had barely time to get inside the inclosure before they were within range.

The fact that he was shut up where it would be necessary to assist in a desperate fight did not disturb him nearly as much as the fact that his friends were already

expecting his return, and the moment when he hoped to effect Nina's release had arrived during his absence.

This last thought was by far the most distressing, because Eph and Barstow were in no danger, while this might be the only opportunity he would have to aid the girl.

There was but little opportunity, however, for him to speculate upon what might have been.

Espinosa had come ready for business, and was not disposed to waste unnecessary time.

After riding within range, he wheeled about, drew his force a short distance away, as if to display their skill in horsemanship, and then sent one forward with a white flag.

Cautious though the manager of Howland's was, he had sufficient courage to refuse to treat with such a gang, and the bearer of the message, whatever it might have been, was forced to beat a rapid retreat in order to save his life.

The stockmen were so eager to begin hostilities that they could not wait until the fellow was within range, but discharged their rifles when there was but little hope of hitting the mark.

On seeing his messenger thus dismissed, Espinosa immediately proceeded to the work before him.

During the next two hours his force was busily engaged in gathering combustible materials, and one of the besieged said, grimly:

"The cusses count on burnin' us out, an' I allow it won't be sich a hard job after dark. Nobody knows bet-

ter than they how to do the work, an' things'll be mighty hot afore long."

"This is what comes of stayin' cooped up here like old women," another man replied. "If we'd gone out as the boy wanted us to; this 'ere fight would 'a' been settled long ago."

Dale did not stop to listen to the conversation.

From what could be judged of the Mexicans' movements, he understood that the battle might be a long one, and he was racking his brains to discover some means of attending to the work which he believed of the most vital importance at such a time.

"I must leave here as soon as the sun sets," he said to himself, as he walked round the stockade, making mental notes of the number and disposition of the enemy.

The Greasers appeared to be gathering in greatest force directly in front of the entrance to the main building, which faced the north, and opposite that point only two horsemen could be seen, who were evidently stationed as sentinels to guard against a surprise from the outside.

"It is by that way I will go," Dale said, unconsciously speaking aloud, not heeding the fact that the old ranchman who had spoken so disparagingly of the manager was standing behind him.

"So you are countin' on leavin' us, eh?"

Dale turned quickly, looked at his questioner an instant, and replied, quietly:

"That is exactly what I propose doing."

"Do you allow that the Greasers won't have anything to say ag'in it?"

“Not unless they happen to see me, and I must run my chances of that.”

“Look here, my son, it strikes me you’re a dandy, an’, after this little scrimmage is over, I hope I’ll get to see you when we can chum together, so to speak.”

CHAPTER XX.

THE DUEL.

Dale did not feel very much like "chumming" with the old ranchman just at this time, but by so doing valuable advice might be received, and he began by explaining exactly what he wanted to do.

"It's got to be a neat piece of work, lad, or you'll never have a chance to try anything more of the kind," the old man said, thoughtfully. "Them Greasers are bound to keep a mighty sharp watch to prevent one of us from gettin' out to give the alarm, an', although there ain't but two on the south side, they're there for every ounce of sand there is in 'em."

"I understand that, and yet I must go."

"Now you're talkin' like a man, my boy, an' I hope you'll pull through all right; but in case you should go under, remember that old Tom Gaskill will take it on himself to settle your score."

"I'm not certain whether that'll do me any good or not, in case I'm killed," Dale replied, with a laugh, "but I'm much obliged to you all the same."

"The sooner you get off the better, for after Espinosa begins work in earnest he'll take precious good care that none of us has a chance to sneak out."

"Where is the best point for me to start from?"

"I'll show you. It won't make much difference if I fool round a couple of hours, since we ain't goin' to have our work laid out till sunset, when the buildin's are fired, so come with me."

Dale followed the old ranchman, and while walking across the inclosure it was possible to observe the movements of the enemy quite distinctly.

Espinosa was beginning the siege with infinite care, a method which had ever characterized his murderous raids.

Inexperienced as Dale was, he understood that the Greaser did not intend to let a single person escape, and that the real work would begin only when the buildings had been set on fire.

Then, unable to fight the flames, it would speedily become simply a question as to whether the besieged should perish in the fire or surrender on such terms as the outlaw was willing to grant.

"I hope you don't think I intend to leave because I'm afraid to stay here," Dale said, as his newly-made friend conducted him toward the southern portion of the stockade.

"Not a bit of it, my lad. It takes more sand to venter out now than to stay. I only hope you'll see a chance to rescue the girl."

"So do I!" Dale replied, fervently.

"I allow that things won't be settled here either way much before mornin', so you've got plenty of time if you get past them two Greasers. Don't rush in at the earliest show you get without thinkin' over all the chances, for

you won't be able to try more'n once, an' the first must count."

Dale was wrapping the lariat over one shoulder and around his waist in such a manner that it could not impede his progress.

"Be sure to keep the handle of your knife free," the old man said, warningly. "I've seen more men go under by bein' careless in that way than could be counted on both our hands."

"Mine is clear," and Dale pulled it from the sheath. "I must take the lariat even if I have to go unarmed."

"Then pull the rawhide a leetle tighter; it'll work out when you're squirmin' along over the ground," and old Tom illustrated his meaning by arranging the lariat in such a manner that it fitted as tightly as a garment. "If you should get into a snug place before you're so far from here that a rifle-shot could be heard, don't shoot, whatever happens, for then you'd have a crowd down on you at once. Do you see that line of live oaks beyond this first cuss?"

"Yes."

"Well, make straight for them, an' once under cover I'll back you ag'in more'n a dozen Greasers."

Then the ranchman examined Dale's weapons; made certain they were in working order, and said, as he replaced the revolvers in the boy's holsters:

"Shoot low, lad, when a man pulls on you, an' keep your eye on the spot where you want to land the bullet, then your hand is bound to be held right. I've been in this country ever since I was big enough to chew ter-

backer, an' never saw any good come of tryin' to sight a revolver. Quick work with the trigger is what counts every time, an' don't forget it."

Never before had Dale been advised as to the best means of taking human life, and these instructions sounded queerly; but he knew only too well that following them implicitly was a necessity at such a time.

By the time old Tom had concluded his lesson the two were at the point where the ranchman intended Dale should begin his venture.

"Here's a chance to get through," he said, as he opened a small, strongly-barred gate. "I'll be on the alert till you're out of range, an' you needn't raise a hand before then. Keep right along, an' if that Greaser don't keep his distance there'll be an empty saddle for you to climb into, providin' you can catch the pony."

Then the old fellow held out his hand.

Dale seized and pressed it warmly.

The moment for action had come. There was no need for more words, and to prolong the conversation would have been to show signs of weakness.

The ranchman opened the gate sufficiently to admit Dale's crawling through, and said, as the boy dropped to his hands and knees:

"Don't take to your feet till you're inside the fringe of live oaks."

Then the gate was closed and barred, and Dale understood that his life now depended solely upon his own skill and exertions.

Cautiously and slowly he worked his way along, flat-

tening his body on the ground until he looked more like a log of wood than a human being, and, stopping from time to time in order that he might raise his head sufficiently to make certain he was proceeding in the proper direction.

He could see the sentinels considerably more than a rifle-shot off, sitting like statues on their horses.

Half the distance was traversed, and there had been no change in the general position of affairs.

Now he was beyond the point where the old ranchman might have aided him with a timely shot.

"It's neck or nothing, and if I fail poor Nina will have no one to help her," he muttered, this last thought nerv-
ing him until even greater dangers than those before him would willingly have been encountered.

One more halt.

It did not seem as if he had lessened the distance between himself and the live oaks by so much as a yard.

The sentinels were still apparently unconscious that any person except themselves was in the vicinity.

One fellow was not more than a hundred yards away, and it seemed as if he could not fail to see the boy, who was straining every nerve to reach the shelter of the trees.

Now more slowly and more cautiously, if indeed that could be possible, Dale continued on.

The moments passed as hours, and his heart beat like a trip-hammer.

Would he succeed in gaining the thicket, or would a bullet end both his life and Nina's hopes at the same time?

He nears the trees. Already it seems as if he could feel the cool shadow.

He is in the underbrush. Five minutes and he is safe.

He arose cautiously to his feet, yet remaining in a stooping position, and ran forward at full speed.

He gained the desired haven, continuing the speed lest the foliage should not be sufficient to screen him from view, and at the very instant when it appeared as if he was successful, a pair of arms clutched him around the waist.

Half-freeing himself by a quick movement, Dale so far released the upper portion of his body as to be able to see his captor.

It was one of Espinosa's gang, who had been sent on foot through the live oaks with some message to the sentinels, or to make certain they were attending to duty.

"Tryin' to give us the slip, eh? Well, you'll find that isn't so easily done when our chief undertakes this sort of business," the man said, as he tightened his hold on the prisoner, and looked around as if debating what should be done with him.

"I don't belong to the ranch," Dale replied, trying to gain time in which to act upon a suddenly conceived plan.

"That makes little difference to us. I reckon you'll be enough to give us sport while we are waiting to smoke the other Gringos out."

"There's no need of choking me to death now, whatever you propose to do. I'm not such a fool but that I know when any one has the drop on me."

"At the same time I'll go through the formality of pullin' your teeth," the fellow replied, as he loosened his hold in order to seize Dale's revolvers.

That was the very movement the boy anticipated, and with the quickness of thought he wrenched one of his hands free, striking the Greaser a crashing blow full in the face.

The man was staggered for an instant, but not sufficiently so to release his hold, and Dale leaped for his throat, succeeding in clutching him firmly.

The fellow had drawn a revolver, and now raised it, intending to strike the boy, since they were at too close quarters to permit of his discharging its contents.

To prevent this Dale threw himself forward, bearing the man to the ground, and causing him to lose the weapon.

By a quick twist the Greaser succeeded in turning just enough to bring Dale down on his side, and then the odds appeared to be in his favor, since he was the stronger of the two.

During all this time not a sound had been made sufficiently loud to attract the attention of the sentinels, and, as this thought passed through Dale's mind with the rapidity of light, he concluded that his adversary believed they were within hailing distance of the ranch.

The Greaser had succeeded in gaining a hold on Dale's throat as they fell, and it now became a question of strength and endurance.

Dale could not reach his knife without giving the man

a similar opportunity, and yet he realized that in such a contest he must soon be the loser.

He tried to twist out of the fellow's grasp by a sudden movement sideways, but this attempt was skillfully foiled.

Then the Mexican, in his turn, thought to change the hold, forcing Dale's head upward while he entwined the boy's body with his legs, thus rendering it possible for one hand to do the duty of two.

Dale felt that his adversary was getting the best of the struggle slowly but surely, and it seemed as if the pain of being forced to leave Nina to her terrible fate would be greater than that of dying.

CHAPTER XXI.

A KNIFE-THRUST.

Although Dale was conscious that the Greaser was slowly but surely gaining an advantage over him, he did not resign himself to death so long as it was possible to continue the struggle.

He realized that the instant he relaxed his efforts ever so slightly a knife-thrust would end all, and instead of acting on the offensive he simply bent his energies to holding his own.

The Mexican, fearing lest the boy's friends should be in the immediate vicinity, and would come up at any moment, was not content to prolong the struggle.

To his mind it was absolutely necessary he should gain possession of the knife at once, and to this end he made an incautious movement which cost him his life.

Loosening his hold for an instant, trusting to his ability to work more quickly than the boy could, he reached toward his belt.

Dale, on the alert for such an opportunity, threw himself on one side in such a manner as to pin the man's arm down, and grasped his own knife.

One quick thrust, and the Mexican sank back with a smothered curse, but only to rise again as Dale leaped to his feet.

The dying outlaw had but one thought—that of revenge, and he groped his way feebly toward the revolver.

If he should gain and discharge it an alarm would be given to the other sentinels, thus cutting Dale off from all opportunity of escape at the very moment when success seemed assured.

It was horrible to struggle further with a dying man, but necessity knows no law, and the boy grappled once more with the enemy.

This fight was not prolonged.

Each instant the Greaser grew more feeble, and at the end of three or four minutes Dale had the weapon in his grasp, while the fellow lay prone on the ground, so nearly lifeless as to be beyond the power of being dangerous.

Nothing now prevented him from continuing on to attempt the double rescue, and he pressed forward through the thicket, on the alert each instant lest other sentinels should be near at hand.

The crackling of rifles in the rear told that Espinosa had begun the battle, and Dale shuddered as he thought of what the result must be in case the Greasers succeeded in firing the building.

"It's no use to worry about them," he said to himself as he hurried on. "I've got enough to do myself, and before night may be in a worse position than they are."

Fortune favored him during the journey.

He did not see any of the enemy, save at a distance, and these were readily avoided by making detours through the thicket.

The life-struggle with the Greaser had delayed him quite a while, but yet he arrived at the mouth of the abandoned mine before his friends believed it time for his return.

"Hello!" he shouted, as he leaned over the aperture.

"Is that you, Dale?" Barstow whispered.

"Yes, and I've got the lariat."

"Make one end fast to a tree, and send the other down."

"Can you get up without my help?"

"If the rope is long enough we oughter do it or be obleeged to stay here the rest of our natural days."

Dale obeyed the order, and in a few moments the ranchman came up hand over hand, shaking himself when he reached the surface much as a dog after a bath.

"You've done us a good turn, lad, for it was big chances that we'd never be found. I come mighty nigh givin' up hope after we'd yelled ourselves hoarse. It didn't seem as if anybody but the Greasers could hear us."

By this time Eph's bullet-shaped head appeared above the surface, and he gave vent to a deep sigh of relief on finding himself once more in the open air.

"Where are Espinosa's scoundrels?" he asked.

"Attacking Howland's ranch."

"I reckon we oughter take a hand in the scrimmage."

"You couldn't get inside. They have surrounded it completely, and are trying to set the buildings on fire. Besides, we have more important work just now."

"Sich as what?"

"Did your fall into the shaft cause you to forget everything?" Dale asked, angrily.

"Not by a long shot, if you mean Miss Nina; but I allow anything of that kind had better be put off till Howland's men whip the life out of them Greasers."

"And if they should fail, our chances would be gone. I think we couldn't have a better opportunity than now, when the camp is guarded only by a few sentinels."

"You're right, lad. Now, if ever, is the time to strike, but it won't do to rush in without kinder prospectin' a little. I'll scout round a bit, an'——"

"I have done that already, and not only know the lay of the land, but have managed to let Nina know we are ready to help her."

Then Dale told briefly what he had done since his companions disappeared so mysteriously, and when he spoke of the hand-to-hand fight, touching upon it lightly, as if the affair was but trifling, Barstow said in a tone of admiration:

"You've got sand, lad, an' I'll stand by you to the last to see you get what we have found."

"You mean the mine?"

"Yes, an' it'll pan out bigger than anything I ever saw before."

"Why, there's free silver enough to set you way up among the nobs," Eph added.

"Never mind that now," Dale replied, impatiently. "We must rescue that poor girl before we talk about mines or anything else."

"Go ahead, an' we'll be at your heels," Barstow said.

"If you know of a good place to begin the music, strike out for it."

Dale did not stop to remove the lariat, but left it hanging from the tree into the shaft, as he set off at full speed, followed closely by his companions.

In a very short time he was at the "thicket of boulders" within full view of the enemy's camp, and Barstow said, approvingly, as he crept through the labyrinth of gigantic rocks:

"I reckon we'll get the upper hand of them devils now, I'd come mighty nigh promisin' to do it alone if the fight at Howland's lasts long enough."

After a short search the three found a spot from which the entire encampment could be seen without exposure of themselves, and Dale eagerly searched with his eyes for Nina.

She was still sitting beneath the rude shelter, but in such a position that any one among the boulders might see her readily, and the boy's heart beat high as he understood that she was waiting for him.

At the opposite side of the encampment were four sentinels, while here and there, where the prisoners could be kept under surveillance, were the Greasers who had been so badly wounded as to unfit them for active duty.

The entire number of Espinosa's gang thus left behind might have been ten, perhaps a dozen, and it was more than reasonable to suppose all were well armed.

"Well?" Dale asked, as he saw that Barstow was mentally figuring the chances for or against them.

"It can be done," the ranchman replied, musingly, "but

not by a rush, as I had counted on when we first struck this place. There's force enough to hold us up, no matter how hard we try."

"Have you any plan?"

"Of course I have, lad. You oughtn't to think I've been settin' here like a bump on a log when there's so much work to be done an' time is short. I count on your creepin' down to where Miss Nina is, an' when me an' Eph open the picnic you must get her away."

"Where?"

"The old mine wouldn't be a bad place; I don't reckon the Greasers could find it, no matter how long they might hunt."

"What will you do?"

"Jine you if we can. In case we don't, count us out, for our toes will be turned up rather than let them devils hold us prisoners."

"It seems cowardly for me to run away and leave you to do all the fighting."

"You may have plenty of it before the dance is over, but in case that don't happen you'll be doin' your share. It's Miss Nina we're after, an' the one who sneaks her off will be doin' his full share of the work."

Dale had no further objections to make.

He began to crawl toward the camp, under shelter of the bowlders, when Barstow stopped him.

"If you could let her know that we're all here it might help along."

Dale knew how that could be done, for if anything

were thrown from the rocks Nina would understand who sent it, and he arose cautiously to his knees.

Waiting for a favorable opportunity, he threw a small stone, and had the satisfaction of seeing it strike close beside her.

She looked up quickly, kissed the tips of her fingers as she waved them toward the bowlders, and Barstow said, approvingly:

“That settles it, an’ you can go ahead; she’ll be waitin’. Keep out of sight as long as possible, an’ when you make a rush we’ll take a hand. Eph an’ I can hold ’em back a few minutes, I reckon.”

Again Dale started.

Making his way through the miniature cañons, he was able to move quite rapidly, and at the same time screen himself from view of the enemy.

In the distance could be heard the reports of firearms, telling that the defenders of Howland’s were making a spirited resistance, and, what was better still, that the leader of the gang had too much work on hand just then to be able to pay any attention to his camp.

Barstow and Eph moved forward a short distance behind the boy, watching his every movement, that they might be ready when the decisive moment arrived.

Dale reached the end of the rift where he must emerge in full view of the sentinels.

He could see Nina looking expectantly in that direction.

The Mexicans were not watching the prisoners intently, but were engaged in listening to the sounds of the con-

flict, as if by them they could learn how the battle was progressing.

"It's now or never," he said to himself, as he mentally prepared for the daring venture.

Rising quickly to his feet, the rifle thrown over his shoulder, and the revolver in his hand, he darted forward.

Nina saw him coming, and ran to meet him.

The two were hardly more than a dozen yards apart, when the report of a rifle was heard, and in another instant it seemed to Dale as if every man in the encampment was discharging his weapons.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN HIDING.

At the moment when Dale started to his feet from behind the bowlders, Barstow and Eph prepared for action by leveling their weapons in the direction of the sentinels.

The boy had traversed half the necessary distance before the Greasers saw him, and then one of them raised his rifle.

He had no opportunity to take aim, for on the instant the ranchman's weapon was discharged, and the fellow fell forward with a bullet in his brain.

This was the signal for a general battle.

The Greasers were ready, and not averse to a scrimmage, but they fancied a large number were concealed among the bowlders, therefore they paid but little attention to Dale. As a matter of fact, not more than one or two knew he was within the encampment, so eager were they to repulse the apparently well-planned attack from the direction of the rocks.

On his part, Dale believed all the men were firing at him, and wondered not a little that none of the bullets came near.

Nina heeded not the shower of missiles. Death was preferable to such a captivity, and the only danger she feared was that the rescue might not be effected.

"I knew you would come, even though I told you not to!" she cried, seizing the hand Dale extended toward her.

"Nothing could have prevented me; but there is no time to talk. Can you run?"

"Yes, yes. Where shall I go?"

"Follow me!"

Clasping her about the waist, Dale started at full speed toward the boulders, literally dragging her a portion of the way, and once behind the shelter of the rocks he halted.

"Don't stop here!" Eph cried. "We'll 'tend to this part of the game, an' you keep on."

"Miss Nina is safe with us, and I can help you."

"She isn't safe, for we may be overpowered," Barstow cried, sternly, as he reloaded his weapon. "Do the part of the work you agreed upon, and we'll join you soon."

The ranchman's head was exposed as he spoke, and Dale saw one of the wounded Greasers taking careful aim at the mark.

Firing at random, he succeeded in crippling the fellow yet further, and Barstow said, in a matter-of-fact tone, as he turned to see what the boy had shot at:

"I reckon you helped me a bit then, lad, but that don't give you the privilege of stayin'. Get along the best you know how, for there's no tellin' when the whole gang may be on us."

The suggestion of such a possibility was sufficient to

decide Dale, and he said, as he clasped Nina's waist once more:

"We must go; the distance isn't far, but if Espinosa should come back, as Barstow says, there'll be no chance of covering it."

"I am ready," was the reply, and the two set off, Dale keeping within the shelter of the bowlders, for the bullets were flying in every direction.

"Where are you taking me?" Nina asked, when they had left the thicket of rocks, and were among the foliage.

"To the shaft of an abandoned mine which Barstow and Eph found. You will not be afraid to enter it?"

"I am ready to go anywhere with you to defend me," was the reply, which caused Dale's heart to beat yet more rapidly, and at that moment he felt as if he could vanquish, single-handed, Espinosa's entire force.

The nearer they approached the proposed hiding-place the louder sounded the guns from Howland's, and Dale said, in a tone of satisfaction:

"Even though the manager was afraid to venture out, he is giving the Greasers a hard fight, and perhaps may whip them so thoroughly that we sha'n't have any more trouble."

Then Nina wanted to know what was being done, and by the time Dale had finished telling her of the peril which menaced the defenders of the ranch, the two were at the mouth of the shaft.

"I shall tie one end of this lariat around your waist, and lower you in," he said, as he pulled the rope up.

Nina advanced to the edge of the aperture boldly.

"Until it is safe to travel toward your home. Just now it would be the height of imprudence, for there's no telling whether Espinosa may not be bolder than ever when this battle is ended."

The lariat was firmly knotted, and Dale swung his fair companion over the yawning mouth of the shaft.

"Shut your eyes," he said.

"There's no need of that; I'm not afraid."

With his feet braced against a tree, and the lariat rubbing the edge of the shaft, Dale allowed the girl to descend slowly.

"Ward off with your hands, or you may be hurt," he cried, and from the aperture came the clear, firm voice of her whom he would have yielded up his life to save:

"I can do that easily. My weight must make your arms ache."

"You are as light as a feather."

She was at the bottom, and Dale leaned over to hear that she was safe.

Instead of the expected words, there came a loud shriek of fear, and he shouted:

"What is the matter? Are you hurt?"

"No—no; but—but—there's a dead man here!"

"I had forgotten that. It is the Greaser who tumbled in with Barstow."

"Can't you come down and take it away?"

Dale had no idea how the corpse could be removed, but he descended the rope swiftly, as if positive the task could be readily accomplished.

Arriving at the bottom, he found Nina crouching as

near the side of the shaft as possible, and the few rays of light which came from above revealed the repulsive object.

It was not possible for Dale to do more than pull the corpse aside and cover the face, after which he said, as he led his companion into the tunnel which branched off from the main opening:

"When Barstow and Eph come we will take it away, but you must try to be brave a while longer."

"You won't leave me?" and she clasped his hand nervously.

"Not a bit of it. We'll stay together till the others arrive."

"Perhaps we shall never see them again."

"I'll guarantee that they come out of the scrimmage all right; but if anything should happen to them, we ought to be able to give Espinosa the slip. I'm hoping he will get the worst of it at Howland's."

Nina did not seem to think this probable, but she made no further remark, and the two sat side by side waiting for some sign from their friends.

Fully half-an-hour elapsed before the welcome sounds were heard, and then a voice from above hailed them.

"Are you all right, Dale?"

"We're here. Are you hurt?"

"We got off without a scratch. Stand one side while I come down."

A moment later Barstow was at the bottom of the shaft, and almost before he could speak Eph stood behind him.

"Did you whip the entire crowd?" Dale asked, eagerly.

"I can't say we made out quite as well as that, but we gave them all they wanted before sayin' good-by. They have got enough to take up their minds for the next five or six hours pullin' lead out of each other. We thought it was time to leave, owin' to the chances of Espinosa's comin' back, an' so tried your game."

"Did they follow?"

"Not a bit of it. I reckon they won't want to leave camp till the whole gang are together once more."

"Do you know how they are getting on at Howland's?"

"The rifles are still crackin', which shows the Greasers haven't got inside yet; but I didn't dare to take the chances of scoutin' around."

Neither the ranchman nor Eph seemed disposed to boast of their exploits among the bowlders, but Dale knew both had given a good account of themselves during the unequal engagement.

The question as to how long they should stay hiding was dismissed by Barstow in a very few words, as he said:

"Wait till night. Then I'll have a look around, and if the coast is anywhere nigh clear, we'll light out. What have we got in the way of grub; I'm hungry enough to eat a burro, pack an' all."

There was but little chance he could appease his appetite then.

The only provisions were the remnants of those given by Dale when he started for the ranch, and these were not more than Eph could have swallowed at one mouthful.

The party discussed the question of Espinosa's suc-

cess or failure, neither speaking of the desire all felt for food and water, until Eph said, as he went toward the lariat:

"I can't stand this any longer. There won't be any harm in takin' a look around, an' I may be able to bring good news, even if grub is lacking."

Barstow tried to persuade him to wait, but in vain.

Ascending the rope hand over hand, he disappeared from view, and the ranchman said, impatiently:

"There goes as good a fellow as ever lived, but he's so cussed headstrong that there's no tellin' when he'll get himself an' us into trouble."

Dale understood that such a remark might alarm Nina, and he hastened to change the subject by saying:

"You told me this was the mine my father discovered. How did you know?"

"Come this way, an' I'll show you."

The ranchman, lighting a match, was on the point of going further up the tunnel, when a noise was heard from the mouth of the shaft, and an instant later Eph literally tumbled down, saving himself from an ugly fall only by clutching the lariat in his descent.

"What's up now?" Barstow asked, angrily, as the latter scrambled to his feet.

"Espinosa's whole gang are under cover of the bushes, an' I run right on them."

"Did they see you?"

"Of course, an' were so nigh behind that I had to fall instead of droppin' down by the rope, otherwise I'd been chuck full of lead by this time."

"It's a pity you lived long enough to get here. Now the Greasers know where we are, an', without food or water, they're likely to have the best of us in short order."

Eph made no reply.

He knew he had made an error which might prove fatal to all, and was ready to listen to any reproaches which might be heaped upon his head.

"Perhaps they won't see the shaft," Dale suggested.

"It took me a long while to find it."

"There's no sich good luck. They know he didn't drop through the solid ground, an'——"

The sentence was never completed, for at that instant the report of a rifle was heard, and a bullet buried itself in the side of the shaft within an inch or two of Nina's head.

"They've got us foul, an' there's nothin' for them to do but shoot us down or starve us out," Barstow said, grimly. "The job won't be a long one, whichever way they work it."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT BAY.

Even as Barstow spoke, half-a-dozen rifle-shots were heard, and the bullets descended in a shower, which was neither pleasant nor safe.

Dale's first thought was of Nina, and he hastily drew her further into the tunnel, where there was no danger of her being wounded.

The ranchman and Eph sheltered themselves by retiring a few paces, but remained where it was possible to hear all that might be going on above.

"Will they come down here after us?" Nina asked, in a tone of fear, for to her the worst misfortune which might occur was that of falling again into Espinosa's power.

"There's no chance of that," Dale replied, reassuringly. "The Greasers know only too well that we could kill them as fast as they came without stirring out of our tracks, and they put too much value on their bodies to take such risks."

"Then there is little danger of our being killed by bullets?"

"None whatever, as long as we stay here," Dale replied, but he took good care not to add that which was in his mind.

It was starvation which confronted them, and this terrible death was foreshadowed by an act that caused Eph to cry, in dismay:

"They've pulled up the lariat, and we have no means of leavin' here until they are ready to let us."

"Don't count on gittin' an invitation to go to the surface from that gang," Barstow said, grimly. "They wouldn't like any better sport than to hear us beggin' to be let out."

"They'll never hear it from me," Eph replied. "I brought this thing on all hands, an', while it's impossible to change it now, I won't disgrace you by cryin' baby."

"What has been done can't be helped, so don't blame yourself when we're in such a tight box," Dale cried, encouragingly.

Before a reply could be made a voice was heard from the mouth of the shaft:

"Hello, down there!"

Nina recognized the tones, and, clinging to Dale, she sobbed.

"Don't let him take me away! Don't let him!"

"Never fear about that," the boy replied. "You are safe so long as one of us remains alive, and before he can get at you a bullet shall put you out of the reach of what would be worse than the most abject misery."

"Yes, yes; better death a thousand times than be in his power again!"

It was Barstow who answered the Greaser's hail, and in so doing he asked:

"Well, what's wanted?"

"The girl. Give her up, and I promise to leave your crowd alone."

"S'pose we don't want to make the trade?"

"Then you shall be kept here to starve, if we can't shoot you down."

"I reckon there's a chance of holdin' out quite a while."

"No matter how much water or provisions you have, they must finally be consumed, and what then?"

"Then we'll shoot at each other, as I'm doing now!"

As he spoke, Barstow discharged his revolver six times in rapid succession, firing at random up the shaft in the hope of hitting Espinosa, but that he failed in the attempt could be told, as a mocking laugh came from the surface, showing that the villain was still unharmed.

"What a pity that I hadn't more than six cartridges!" the ranchman said, in a tone of regret. "Perhaps one ball might have struck him if I'd fired twice as many."

"You shall learn what it is to brave me," the Mexican cried from above, the sound of his voice telling that he was a safe distance away. "I will not leave this place until I know every one of your party is dead."

"Then you'll stay a long while, an' it isn't certain some of the crowd from Howland's won't hunt you up before that time comes."

"Those at the ranch will stay where they are," was the mocking reply, and Eph said, in a low tone:

"That shows the Greasers got the best of the fight. Most likely they've wiped the whole place out."

"It looks like it; but at the same time I can't think he'll

dare to stay many days in these parts, for the ranchmen must be on his trail."

Barstow's words failed to comfort the little party who were now at bay, for, unless aid came very quickly, they would not be alive to profit by it.

During the next hour but few words were spoken, and then Barstow threw a handful of dirt out of the tunnel, thus making a noise which might have been mistaken for the movement of a man.

Instantly three or four shots were fired, thus showing that the enemy were on the alert, and the stockman said, grimly:

"Espinosa is keepin' his word, an' it proves he's got the best of the fight, otherwise them devils wouldn't dare to stay there."

No one had any comments to make on the result of his experiment.

All realized to the utmost the hopelessness of the situation, and at such a time words seemed but a mockery.

Dale had forced Nina to sit down, and she clung to his arm as if the only chance for life depended upon keeping him by her side.

Now and then he whispered some words of comfort; but she only replied by a pressure of the hand, and despite all the dangers which surrounded them, the moments thus passed were very sweet to him.

When the day dawned the prisoners were still occupying the same relative positions as when darkness overtook them, and outlined against the gray sky could be seen the form of the sentinel who was standing guard over them.

"There's a chance to make the time pass more quickly," Barstow said, as he pointed to the figure. "It ain't square to let them have all the fun, an' I'm goin' to see what can be done with that fellow."

As patiently as a cat watches a mouse did he keep his eyes on the dim outlines, until the Greaser incautiously approached the mouth of the shaft to look down.

The ranchman's rifle was discharged; a cry of mortal anguish was heard, and the figure disappeared.

"Espinosa had better send another man if he wants to keep us here," Barstow said, quietly, as he reloaded his weapon.

"Isn't there a chance we can get out, now that he's not able to harm us?" Dale asked.

"How will you do it without the lariat?"

This answer acted like a douche of cold water, and Dale, noticing the additional look of alarm on Nina's face, asked, quickly:

"Suppose you show me how you knew my father discovered this mine? There's nothing particular to do, for I don't reckon the others will give you an opportunity for a shot, and almost anything is better than sitting here idle."

"Very well; Eph shall stay on guard, for there may be another fool in the gang like the one I downed, and we can't afford to miss a chance. We'll want something for a flare, so pick up all the twigs you can reach without exposing yourselves."

A small armful of fuel was gathered, and Barstow carried it as he led Dale and Nina to the further extremity

of the tunnel, which was not less than a hundred feet long.

Here the ranchman built a small fire, and, as the flame illuminated the place, he pointed to the side of the excavation, where a huge, smooth rock had been left partially exposed.

On this, cut rudely as if with a pocketknife, Dale read the following:

On the twentieth day of June, I, Owen Wrightman, of Silver City, discovered this old shaft and tunnel, and do hereby lay claim to the same, warning all comers that the requirements of the law will soon be complied with.

"Would such a notice as that prevent others from taking possession if they had found it?" Dale asked, when he finally deciphered the scrawl.

"Not sich as Espinosa, but an honest man would allow that your father had filed his claim in proper shape. Here she is, all yours now, an' there's metal enough in sight to make you rich, even if the lead is never worked."

That this statement was correct Dale could have no doubt, for free silver might be seen in every direction along the trend of the vein, which at this point appeared to be ten feet in diameter.

Then the ranchman explained how it could be worked with but little outlay of money, and while he was engaged with these details Nina retraced her steps to where Eph stood guard.

"It doesn't promise to do us much good," Dale said, when he was alone with Barstow. "Even if Espinosa should give up the attempt to recapture Nina, and leave

this portion of the country, how could we get out, now the lariat is gone?"

"We must hit on some plan."

"But you didn't succeed in doing so when you and Eph were here."

"You're right, lad; but then we were countin' on makin' you hear us. Now that we can't look for outside help, we're bound to buckle down to the question, for I don't reckon on dyin' here like rats in a trap."

"With neither provisions nor water, there isn't much time to spare," Dale replied, gloomily.

"Now, don't look on the wrong side of the matter. Go back, and send Eph here; between us we shall hit on somethin'."

Dale did as he was ordered, and he and Nina crouched near the edge of the shaft, where they would be screened from view, keeping watch on the shadows above.

The boy tried to talk of other matters than their own desperate situation, but his companion persisted in discussing the true position of affairs.

"Is there any chance we can ever get out of here?" she asked.

"Barstow will hit on some plan, he feels confident."

"Do you think he can?"

"Yes," Dale replied, trying unsuccessfully to speak in a firm tone; but Nina detected the slight hesitation, and said, decidedly:

"I understand that you are trying to deceive me now, and it is useless. I would rather starve here than be in

Espinosa's power again, therefore I shall not be frightened to know there is no hope for us."

This declaration had the effect of loosening Dale's tongue, and he no longer attempted to hide from her the truth.

"I can't imagine how it is to be done," he said, hopelessly. "It would take a week to cut a way up the side of the shaft, and it would not be possible to begin even that work until we were certain Espinosa had left."

"How long could we live without food or water?"

"I don't know; three or four days, perhaps."

"And then——"

At this point a loud cry was heard from the tunnel, and, fearing some new disaster was about to befall them, Dale ran hastily along the passage, regardless of the fact that he was deserting his post of duty.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOR LIBERTY.

When Dale arrived at the end of the passage, he could see, thanks to the flames, Barstow and Eph talking excitedly, and he asked, nervously:

"What's the matter? I thought I heard somebody shout."

"So you did, lad," the ranchman replied. "I was kinder celebratin' the fact that I'd struck a lead what will bring us out of this."

"How do you mean to begin?"

"We can't go by the shaft, that's a fact, for if Espinosa's gang should step one side, we couldn't get up; so it's elsewhere we must look, an' I've found it."

"Where?"

"What do you see on top of the rock where your father filed his claim?"

"Nothing but sand or gravel."

"Correct. Now, that stone is ten feet high, which leaves jest so much the less work to be done before we can take the back trail."

"I don't understand you yet."

"It's plain as the nose on a blind man's face. I reckon we'll run a shaft up through there."

"With neither pick nor shovel, it would take a month to do the job."

"In that case I'll be way off in my calculations, for I'm figgerin' on bein' through by daylight."

"How?"

"Simply by usin' our knives. The dirt is loose, an' we can let it fall back here in the tunnel. That'll only be raising the level, an' it won't cost much to pull the whole lot out when we get ready to open the Last Chance Mine."

Barstow did not spend many moments in conversation.

As he ceased speaking he began to attack the soft earth with his knife, bringing down large quantities at each blow, and Eph pushed it forward or back with his feet, building up the floor of the passage.

"You'd better go back to the shaft, lad," the latter said, after Dale had watched the work several moments. "We must know if the Greasers on guard suspect what's bein' done, an' you should be where it's possible to hear anything that may be said."

Dale's heart was decidedly lighter when he rejoined Nina.

The fact that something was being done toward effecting their release cheered the girl quite as much as it had her companion, and instead of talking about the possibility of dying, they began upon the chance of evading Espinosa's gang after emerging from the underground prison.

Listen as he might, Dale could hear nothing from the outer world.

That some of the Greasers were yet keeping guard he knew by the shadow which passed and repassed the mouth

of the shaft, but, from all he could tell, the sentinel was alone.

"The villains count on starving us into giving you up," he said to Nina, and the latter asked:

"Would you do such a thing when hunger caused great distress?"

"I had rather shoot you now."

"That would be more merciful; but there is no need to speak of such a thing, for I feel certain the tunnel will be a success."

The hours passed slowly, each bringing with it the most intense desire for food and drink.

Now and then Nina went to the further end of the passage in order to report upon the progress of the labor, and, on the conclusion of one visit, she said, mournfully:

"I am certain those poor fellows are suffering terribly for water. The perspiration is running down their faces in streams, but yet they work rapidly, without speaking. It seems as if they did not dare to talk, lest something should be said regarding the desire for a drink."

"How much have they done?"

"I don't know; but Barstow is out of sight, and the earth he sent down has filled the tunnel nearly to the top of the big rock."

Dale could form no true idea of the flight of time, but when it seemed to him that the day must be drawing to a close the ranchman came to the mouth of the shaft, literally reeking with perspiration, and looking nearly exhausted.

"How near through are you?" Dale asked, anxiously.

"The job is finished. I took good care not to break the surface, but there is not more than two inches over the mouth of our tunnel."

"Didn't you try to look out?"

"No, for there would be too much risk in such a venture. We'll wait till after dark, and then try our luck."

"Do you have any idea where it leads to?"

"From the roots of the trees we've been workin' among I should say it'll take us inside the thicket."

"You did the work quickly."

"The soil was so loose that it was a job soon done. In a few hours now we'll be where all hands can roll in water, an' I reckon none of us will ever taste anything sweeter. It seems as if my tongue was cracking with thirst."

Eph, looking triumphant, soon joined his comrades, and the little party sat near the shaft, watching for the shadows of night to fall.

The time passed slowly, but finally the light died away, until a mantle of gloom was spread over the mouth of the aperture, and Barstow said, as he rose to his feet:

"I reckon there's no need to wait any longer. We'll make the break now, an' if the Greasers learn what we're up to it'll be a question of fightin' till all hands are wiped out."

He led the way through the tunnel, the others following close behind, with their hearts beating like trip-hammers.

The level had been raised until the little party were forced to walk up quite a steep incline before reaching the path which all hoped would lead to liberty.

Barstow went first, crawling on his hands and knees. Dale followed next, with Nina very near, and Eph brought up the rear.

There were places in this hastily constructed passage where considerable squeezing was necessary in order to get through, but no mishap occurred, and Barstow came to a halt.

"We're at the top," he whispered to Dale. "I'll break out an' skirmish round a bit before you're to follow."

A choking cloud of sand descended upon the heads of the remainder of the party, as he forced himself through the slight barrier, and during the next ten minutes the three waited in anxious suspense for the ranchman's return.

The heat was stifling, the dust choked them until it seemed almost impossible to breathe; but no one thought of complaining, since the end would mean so much.

Just at the time when Dale began to fancy Barstow had been captured, he returned, whispering, as he bent over the excavation:

"Come on, an' move quickly. One of the Greasers is still on guard at the mouth of the shaft, but we are too far away to fear him."

"Did you see the rest of the gang?" Dale asked, as he emerged from the narrow passage, and turned to aid Nina.

"No, it would be takin' too much risk to hunt for 'em. Come on lively."

Nina soon emerged in the open air, and Eph followed,

the latter whispering, as he drew in long breaths of the pure atmosphere :

"That was a leetle the hottest job I ever struck. Half-an-hour longer an' I'd been roasted like an ox at a barbecue."

"Don't stop to chin now, but follow me the best you know how," and Barstow set off through the thicket, with the air of one who is thoroughly familiar with the locality.

During half-an-hour he traveled rapidly, stopping now and then to listen for sounds betokening danger, but each instant gaining something in the flight.

At the end of this time they were at the edge of the timber where Dale had the duel with Espinosa's scout, and that which they saw told there was no hope of aid from those who had defended Howland's ranch.

A dull glow marked the spot where the buildings once stood, and Barstow exclaimed, as he gazed upon the evidences of devastation :

"That Greaser Espinosa oughter be cooked to death over them coals. Hangin' or shootin' is too good for such as him."

"Do you suppose all hands were killed?" Nina asked, in a tone of awe.

"I don't reckon it was quite so bad as that. The men could make a break for it when they found the buildings were fired ; but many a good fellow has gone down before this thing was done."

"There's no use in our standing here looking at the fire," Dale said, impatiently. "If Espinosa has been victorious, then all the more reason why he can spend the

time hunting us down. We must make as many miles as possible before daylight."

"We can't travel without grub or water. The Greasers have finished their business at the ranch, an' we sha'n't be takin' many risks by goin' over."

"What for?"

"To get the stuff we need before startin'. It ain't likely the villains have cleaned up everything, an' we'll be playin' in mighty hard luck not to find a bite an' a drink."

Neither Dale nor Nina thought it safe to visit the ruined ranch while Espinosa was in the vicinity, but Barstow felt so confident there would be no particular danger that they could not refuse to accompany him.

The scene which met their gaze when they arrived at that portion of the ranch illuminated by the yet glowing embers was a sad one.

Here and there the body of a man told what a brave resistance had been made.

The household goods, scattered and destroyed, lay on all sides, and one could well fancy the work of pillage when the Greasers finally succeeded in entering.

"There's no use huntin' for terrible things," Barstow said, as he noted the shudder which passed over Nina's slender frame. "We must have grub, and that only is to be looked for. All hands turn to, and the sooner we are out of here the better."

Dale and Nina went in one direction, while the two men set off in different courses, and the first named, to his great delight, soon found a spring of water, which

seemed more precious just then than all the treasure in Last Chance Mine.

Both knelt upon the ground, plunging their heads beneath the surface of the cool liquid as they drank, and the intense pleasure of quenching thirst had not been exhausted, when Dale heard a voice behind him say, in a tone of exultation:

"So I've got you without having to wait many hours? Up with your hands! both of you, or I'll fire!"

It was Espinosa!

CHAPTER XXV.

DALE'S BRAVE FIGHT.

Dale knew only too well that an order to "hold up your hands" is not to be trifled with, and he obeyed at the same instant he arose to his feet and wheeled half-around, facing the speaker.

The Mexican must have been in the vicinity of the ruins when the little party came within the circle of light cast by the embers, and had probably followed the two young members in the hope of finding them at a safe distance from the two men.

Fortune had favored him in this respect at least, and now he stood looking with a triumphantly wicked smile on his face, first at Dale, and then Nina.

"Don't make the mistake of trying to alarm your friends," he said, in a low tone. "At the first word you or the girl might make, I would shoot one and carry away the other before assistance could come."

"Well, what do you intend to do?" Dale asked, speaking as calmly as possible.

"Slit your throat, and then take my prisoner back to camp."

"In that case I can't see what I gain by holding my tongue. I may as well shout for help, and take the chances of getting a bullet, which would be a preferable death."

Some such thought was in Nina's mind also, and, with a loud, shrill scream, she turned sharply past the villain, running at full speed in the direction taken by Barstow and Eph.

Espinosa involuntarily wheeled around as if intending to pursue, and for an instant lost sight of Dale.

The latter knew this was the only chance he had for life, and, bending all his energies in the effort, he sprang upon the Greaser, alighting fairly upon his shoulders.

It was a mistake such as the scoundrel had never made before, and was likely to cost him dearly.

The force of the blow sent him headlong to the earth, and Dale clung to his arms with the energy of despair, for if the fellow could succeed in breaking the hold ever so slightly his adversary would not have many seconds to live.

In the meanwhile Nina was running past the ruins of the buildings, screaming loudly, and even as he struggled to keep the prisoner down Dale could hear Barstow's answering cry.

Espinosa put forth every plan to shake off his antagonist; but the boy was laboring to save himself from death, and the girl he had rescued from something worse, and his strength was redoubled by the thought of how much depended upon his efforts.

Twice Espinosa nearly succeeded in rolling over to bring his enemy undermost, but each attempt resulted in failure.

Bravely as he was working, Dale knew he could not re-

tain his advantage many moments longer, and began to aid Nina in summoning help.

"Come quickly, or he'll get the best of me!"

"You are right," the Greaser panted; "but they won't arrive in time."

Now Dale realized that the same cries which summoned his friends would also warn Espinosa's gang, and the chances of being able to avenge his father's death seemed slight.

It was just at the moment when hope had almost deserted him, although his strength still remained, that Eph arrived upon the scene.

"Who have you got?" he asked, speaking with difficulty because of his heavy breathing.

"Espinosa. Blow the snake's brains out. He admits having killed father."

"Then a bullet is too quick a way of sending him into the next world," Eph said, in a business-like tone, as he seized the struggling Greaser by the throat, and deliberately began to choke him. "Here comes Barstow, an' we'll soon give him a taste of what he's dealt out so often to others."

"But the rest of the gang may be here at any moment."

"Then it won't take long to kill the rascal; but till we're obleeged to, I don't want to wipe him out."

Barstow was on the scene of action by this time, and understood the situation at a glance.

He evidently shared Eph's ideas in regard to the manner in which the Greaser should be sent to his last account, for, instead of dealing the death-blow, he began to

pinion the prisoner with some bits of old lariats which were scattered about near at hand.

"There!" he said, in a tone of satisfaction, when the task was completed and Espinosa lay on the ground unable to move hand or foot, "I reckon that's the best job we've done since startin' out on this trip. It was a good thing you didn't choke him to death, Eph."

"I know too much for that; sich a thing as he is mustn't die easy."

"But his men will soon be here," Dale cried. "Some of them must have been near enough to hear our shouts, and what kind of a show do we stand against that whole gang?"

"None whatever," Espinosa said, with a snarl. "You are trapped, and will never leave this place alive."

"That remains to be seen, my friend," Barstow replied, as he seized the fellow by the shirt collar, and began dragging him toward the half-burned ruins of one of the out-buildings.

"Take care!" Eph shouted, warningly. "Here comes two of the desperadoes, ridin' as if their master was after 'em."

"You an' Dale hold 'em in check, while I get this one and the girl under cover."

The ranchman had not ceased speaking before Eph discharged his rifle.

It was a snap shot, but it brought down the pony, and the rider, scrambling to his feet, ran off at full speed, followed by a bullet from Dale's revolver.

The other man evidently thought it wise to get rein-

forcements before opening battle, and he rode back rapidly, Espinosa shouting after him a long string of Spanish oaths, which would have killed, if the speaker's desires could have been gratified.

"That puts an end to our leavin' this place to-night," Eph said, half to himself. "The rest of the crowd will soon be here, and then I reckon we'll see some hot work."

"Have you got any ammunition?" Dale asked, as he followed his friend toward the place Barstow had selected at which to make a stand.

"Enough to run us through the night. I allow Espinosa has got a belt full, an' that'll help out considerable."

When the two reached the ruins it was seen that in the short time Barstow had put it in a reasonably good condition to serve as a barricade.

The charred timbers which had fallen on the inside were piled up where the walls seemed weakest, and the ranchman was engaged filling up the opening that served as a doorway.

"We oughter be able to give a good account of ourselves here," he said, grimly, "for I don't allow they'll fight very brisk after we get things in shape."

Dale failed to understand the meaning of this remark, and was considerably mystified at seeing Barstow begin to lash Espinosa securely to one of the heavier timbers.

"There isn't much chance of his getting away, even if you don't make him fast there," he said.

"I know that, lad; but you see it's part of my plan to make this scoundrel help us hold the fort. Come here,

Eph, an' give me a lift!" he added, as his work was completed.

The two men then lifted the timber with the Greaser tied to it in such a manner that he could not slip down, placing it in a position where it nearly closed the aperture through which Dale had entered.

Espinosa, held upright by the rope under his arms, was now several feet above the ground, and in such a position that he could see all which was going on outside, at the same time his men might have a full view of him.

"There, what do you think of that?" Barstow asked, with a laugh. "It'll worry him a bit, if the bullets fly too thick, an', unless some of his gang have a grudge ag'in him, I don't allow there'll be very much shooting."

"They shall fire through my body rather than let you escape," the prisoner said, bitterly.

"Very well, my friend, we'll stand it, if you can, an' be sorry you got off so easy; but I don't count on your bein' killed the first shot, so we'll have some satisfaction out of your worthless carcass."

The ranchman's work was not yet completed.

He directed Dale and Eph to make a screen of timbers in one corner of the cleared space, in order to shelter Nina from the bullets, and when she declared that she would take the same chances as the others, he laughingly promised to lash her to a timber also, rather than run the risk of her being killed by a stray shot.

"We've had too much trouble in getting you to have an accident happen, miss, an' in there you must go when the Greasers open the ball."

"Will you set me free, if I promise to leave this section of the country with all my men, and make no attempt to harm you or the girl?" Espinosa asked, suddenly.

"So? Given up the desire to die, in order to serve us out, eh?"

"A live dog is better than a dead lion."

"So I think; but in this case you'll be a dead dog instead of a lion, for if your crowd should happen to get the upper hands, you'll be wiped out before I give up the fight."

The Greaser made no more appeals.

Dale fancied that he had grown paler, and believed he could see a look of fear on the face of the fellow who had always boasted he never knew what it was to be afraid.

The little party completed such preparations as it was possible to make before Espinosa's men appeared.

As nearly as could be judged, the entire gang had come out in search of the fugitives, but it yet remained to be seen whether they were aware of the fact that their leader was a prisoner.

The Greasers rode slowly around the collection of ruins, evidently trying to decide where the enemy had sought shelter, and, when the circle was completed, Barstow discharged his rifle, tumbling one of the party out of his saddle.

"Thought I'd kinder telegraph to 'em where we'd gone, so's to save valuable time," he said, grimly, as he reloaded the weapon.

A shower of bullets was the reply to this challenge,

and the ping of the missiles around him broke the slight remnant of courage Espinosa had left.

He shouted loudly some command in Spanish, which was answered by one of his followers, and then it was as if the entire body of horsemen had suddenly been turned into statues, so motionless did they stand gazing at the figure fastened to the timber.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BAFFLED.

Not until Espinosa called the attention of the men to his helpless condition did they understand the position of affairs.

The night was dark, the embers burning low, and the ruins of the building, hastily converted into an impromptu fort, were so far in the shade that the features of a man could not have been recognized at any great distance; hence their ignorance until he spoke.

It was a plan worthy their own refined cruelty, but they appeared surprised that any one else should have conceived it.

The entire party came as near as seemed consistent with safety, and stood gazing at their helpless chief, the sound of their voices, as they discussed the change in affairs, being plainly heard by the besieged.

Now and then one would ride swiftly past the ruins to make certain it was really the bold Espinosa who had been fastened to a timber like some of his own victims, and with each such attempt to gain knowledge the main body would the more eagerly comment upon the matter, until the buzz of conversation sounded like the hum of angry bees.

"I thought that would puzzle 'em," Barstow said, with

a chuckle of delight, as he took careful aim at a horseman who was dashing by, and missed the mark. "There's a bullet wasted, which is clear extravagance, for sich things may count a good bit before this dance is ended."

Regardless of the "extravagance," Eph and Dale opened fire on the main body, and, learning that they were within range, the Greasers fell back; but whether or no they had returned to camp could not be ascertained in the darkness.

"I've got some business outside," the stockman said, as the men disappeared. "Keep your eyes skinned while I'm away."

"Don't run any risks," Dale replied, as he laid his hand on Barstow's arm. "We've done too much of that since this chase was begun."

"You an' Eph have, but I reckon I've been mighty cautious. It's my turn now."

"When I acted rashly was while Miss Nina was in that scoundrel's power. Now we've rescued her it is necessary to be very careful."

"You're right, lad," the stockman replied, gravely. "I promise not to get us into another snarl; but it stands us in hand to prepare for a long siege, an' I'm goin' to scout around for grub an' sich like. There ain't much chance them cusses will make a rush till after they've talked this matter over a good bit."

Dale made no further attempt to detain him, for he knew how important it was they should have the means of sustaining life so long as the Greasers might continue the siege, and the stockman departed.

All three of those left behind now stood watch, straining their eyes in the darkness to discover the first signs of the enemy's approach, in order that Barstow should have timely warning.

At the end of half-an-hour a dim shadow was seen in the distance, moving directly across the front of the ruins.

This was followed by a second and a third, all of whom took up stations out of range, where a watch could be maintained.

"They've posted sentinels so we can't give them the slip, and take the prisoner with us," Dale said, when the shadows were motionless, and Eph added:

"I'm going to invite one of 'em to move on. He don't make the best kind of a target on a night like this, but it won't do any harm to try."

"You mustn't attempt anything of the kind," Dale said, nervously, as he struck up Eph's weapon.

"Why not?"

"Barstow would think an attack was about to be made, and rush back just at a time, perhaps, when he is doing something important."

"All right, I won't fire, but it seems mighty hard not to have a go at a thing like that," and Eph lowered his weapon sulkily.

A moment later the stockman returned, bringing with him a small supply of bacon, hard biscuits, and cold baked meat.

"I had found these jest at the time you tackled our friend on the timber, an' thought I wouldn't try to bring 'em away while you was busy. Here's what'll last a

couple of days, unless Eph is struck with one of his ruinous appetites, when the whole lot's bound to go at a sweep."

"Where did you get them?" Dale asked.

"From what's left of the pantry. That end of the house ain't burned as bad as this, an' we could get at grub enough to keep us six months. I found a jug, an' am goin' after water. Has anything happened?"

Dale told him of the sentinels, and the news appeared to relieve his mind instead of causing additional anxiety.

"I reckon it shows they don't intend to make any move till mornin'. Get things ready for supper while I'm gone."

He disappeared in the darkness, and Nina, who had insisted that it was her duty to "set the table," was on the point of beginning the work, when the report of a rifle rang out sharply from the rear of the building.

"They are after Barstow," Dale cried, as he ran to the entrance, and began hurriedly pulling away the barricade.

"What are you doin'?" and Eph dragged the boy back quickly.

"We can't leave him alone."

"That's jest what we must do, for most likely there are a dozen waitin' to jump in the minute we leave. It'll be mighty tough if Barstow has run into a nest of the snakes, but we're bound to look out for ourselves an' the girl."

It was evident that Espinosa believed a concerted attack was about to be made, in order to effect his release, for he began shouting loudly in Spanish.

"I'll shoot if you yell ag'in," Eph cried, as he pressed the muzzle of his revolver to the Greaser's head.

This threat had the effect of reducing him to silence, and a second time the report of a weapon rang out, apparently close at hand.

"Get somethin' to stuff in this villain's mouth," Eph said. "I don't dare to leave him for a second, an' nobody knows how soon we may have our hands full, when I'll be needed for somethin' better than waitin' to kill a Greaser the minute he yips."

Dale picked up a fragment of charred wood, and, with the hem torn from Nina's dress, he tied it in Espinosa's mouth.

Again was heard the crack of a rifle yet nearer the impromptu fort, and the two inside stood with raised weapons ready to aid their friend, if it should be possible without leaving the shelter.

"He's workin' this way, firin' whenever he gets a chance," Eph whispered. "I don't allow there's more'n one after him, an' we must stand by to tear down some of these timbers——"

Before the sentence was finished Barstow appeared at the entrance, and as he fired a parting shot Eph and Dale pulled away a couple of the heavy beams.

"That was a close shave," the stockman said, as he wiped the perspiration from his face. "I reckoned one spell that they had me foul."

"What happened?"

"I'd jest got to the spring an' filled the jug when the flash of the powder brought me up all standin'. One of

the gang must have crept around that way, hopin' to get a shot from behind, an' I'd run right on him. The cuss oughter be hosswhipped for not knowin' how to shoot."

"It was lucky for you that he didn't," Dale said, with a smile.

"You're right, lad; but at the same time I allers hate to see a chump standin' behind a good gun. I had to drop the jug before I could shoot, an' by that time the Greaser had got under cover. We tried a little match on the way up; but it's so dark that neither of us did much harm."

"But you brought the water, I see."

"Of course; wasn't that what I went for?"

"Do you think there are more of the crowd creepin' around in the rear?" Eph asked.

"If they are up to that game it's spoiled now, for we know what to expect. We'll get something to eat while there's time, an' then it's a case of keepin' our eyes open mighty wide the rest of the night."

Barstow was about to begin an attack on the food when Nina asked Dale:

"Are you going to keep that wood in Espinosa's mouth?"

"Why shouldn't we?"

"Because it is cruel. Never mind what he has done, it is torture enough to be tied to the timber and forced to remain where the first bullet which comes may wound him grievously."

Barstow asked for an explanation, and on being told

what had happened decided in favor of granting Nina's request.

"We'll give the cuss a chance to talk with us, if he wants to; but in case there's any attempt to speak with them outside, in it goes again."

The prisoner was wonderfully relieved when the gag had been removed, and then, on the alert for the slightest suspicious noise, the little party began the long-deferred meal.

A hearty supper, during which Espinosa watched them narrowly, and then Barstow suggested that all save himself try to get some sleep.

"I don't allow the Greasers will do anything before mornin', an' it stands us in hand to be fresh for the work they'll likely cut out."

"I must do my share of standing guard," Dale said, and Nina insisted that she also should be allowed to do a portion of the duty.

"All hands shall have a turn at it before daylight. I'll begin the job, an' call the others when I'm tired."

"Do you intend to kill me by keeping me in this position until morning?" Espinosa asked, with a whine.

"It wouldn't be any worse than you've served many a good fellow, an' if you die that's no business of ours," Barstow replied, unconcernedly.

"Why not kill me at once, and have done with it?"

"Because, as I said before, we want to give you a taste of your own medicine."

Much as Nina had suffered at the Greaser's hands she

was sorry to see him in pain; but the stockman would not listen to her pleadings.

"He must take what he's given so often, an' I only wish we could serve him out a worse dose."

Finally all save Barstow laid down to sleep, and before morning both Eph and Dale were called upon to do their share of sentry duty; but nothing was seen to cause alarm.

The enemy could be heard riding to and fro as if on the alert to prevent the besieged from making their escape, but not one came near enough to provoke a bullet.

When the sun rose they were four or five hundred yards away in the direction of their camp, and a few moments later one of the number rode forward waving a blanket as a flag of truce.

"Don't let him get near enough to talk with Espinosa," Dale whispered. "I'm sure the fellow has some kind of scheme in mind, for he looked wonderfully pleased when this man started. Most likely he counts on giving him a hint or two in Spanish."

"You're right, lad," and the ranchman sent a bullet so near the head of him who bore the improvised flag that the request to remain at a distance was readily understood.

CHAPTER XXVII.

JUSTICE.

The rider reined in his pony and sat looking first toward the ruins and then at his comrades, as if undecided what to do.

"Keep your eyes on him," Barstow said, "and in case he tries to come nearer be sure to nail him."

"Why not let him talk?" Dale asked.

"Because we don't want any dealings with sich cattle. It's only a waste of time."

"They want to make some trade with you," the prisoner said, earnestly. "Can't you give them a chance to tell what they are willing to do?"

"Not a bit of it. In the first place, I wouldn't trust a single mother's son of them if he should swear on a dozen Bibles, an' then ag'in there's no show for a bargain. What we've got we'll hold on to, an' what they get will be earned."

"Do you think you can stand against those men when they make an assault?" Espinosa asked, threateningly.

"We're goin' to try mighty hard, an' if we don't it'll be all the same to you, for you won't be here to see us give in."

"I thought you Americans believed it was cruel to torture prisoners."

"So we do until we get one of your stripe, an' then there's nothin' too bad."

"It may be that I shall have a voice in the matter. It is not possible you can stand long against my brave fellows."

"Don't build too many hopes on anything of that kind. Your gang won't find it as easy to wipe us out as they think, an' the price that'll be paid for makin' the attempt will be a big one."

Espinosa did not reply to this remark, but the triumphant smile which came over his face caused Dale to think he had observed some maneuver which escaped their attention.

Now that the leader of the Mexicans had nothing more to say, the interest of the besieged was centered on the man who was between them and the main body of the enemy.

Twice did the flag-bearer try to advance; but each time he was warned by a bullet, until he finally gave up the task in despair, and rode back to his companions, who showed their displeasure at his reception by making gestures expressive of anger and defiance.

"Go on with your monkey-shines!" Barstow shouted. "They don't hurt us, an' we'll soon make you dance in a different manner."

During the next half hour the Greasers remained inactive, and the besieged took advantage of the opportunity to get breakfast.

Nina attended to this portion of the work, and Dale

thought he had never seen food look more inviting than as she arranged it on the charred planks.

By standing where a full view of the surrounding country could be maintained the little party were enabled to eat in a leisurely fashion; but an interruption came before the meal was concluded.

"I reckon our loafin' spell is over," Barstow said, suddenly, as he dropped a slice of bacon and seized his rifle. "The devils are gettin' ready for a rush, an' we'll have it hot enough for the next five or ten minutes."

Dale and Eph grasped their weapons, and the former literally forced Nina to take shelter behind the barricade especially erected for her.

She insisted that it might be possible she could aid in some manner; but the boy would not listen to any argument.

"You must take care of yourself, whether you want to or not," he said. "It is for us to do the fighting."

"And am I to remain idle?"

"Certainly, while there is any danger."

Very unwillingly she went behind the timbers, and Dale returned to the doorway, where he could see what was being done.

The alarm was not false.

The Greasers had already mounted and were spurring their ponies forward at full speed.

"Don't fire until they are close on us, an' then blaze away for all you are worth!" the stockman said as he prepared for decisive action.

The distance between the two parties was rapidly lessened.

Not a weapon was discharged on either side until the horsemen were within a few yards of the ruins, and during the short time of silence Espinosa appeared wild with terror.

He yelled frantically in Spanish to his men; but did not succeed in checking the advance, and his trembling voice was soon drowned by the crackling of firearms.

The besieged were fairly well sheltered, and, riding at such a pace, the Greasers naturally shot wild; but for all that there were more bullets sent inside the ruins than was either pleasant or safe for the occupants.

Before the battle had been in progress two minutes Dale recognized the wisdom of sheltering Nina, as she probably did also, for unless crouching directly under the front walls, there would have been little chance of her escaping a wound.

It was a fight in which each of the combatants loaded and fired as rapidly as possible.

There were times when it was useless to attempt to take aim, so thickly filled with smoke was the narrow spot in which the besieged were confined, and the reports of the weapons sounded like the long roll of a drum.

Twice during the wild fight did Dale hear Espinosa shriek with pain, thus showing as many bullets had found a lodging place in his worthless body; but just at that time the excitement was so great that he gave but little heed to the matter.

Four successive charges did the enemy make on the

three who were so bravely holding the apology for a fort, and on each occasion were they forced to fall back, the many riderless ponies which dashed to and fro telling at what an expense of life the battle was being waged.

Dale was only conscious that he discharged his weapons as rapidly as possible, shooting point-blank at the enemy now and then, or firing at random through the opening.

Espinosa suffered all the agonies of death during the brief engagement, and there must have been many times that his thoughts went back to the alleged sport he had engaged in, when a poor prisoner had served as target for his half-drunken men.

For the besieged it was a reckless expenditure of cartridges; but under such circumstances there was no way by which they could have been saved.

Finally the Greasers drew off out of range once more, disheartened because of their losses, and Barstow summed up the situation by saying:

"Eph has a flesh-wound on the left arm; but it don't count, because he can use a rifle as well as ever. Espinosa knows where two bullets struck—one in his arm an' the other on the shoulder. The rest of the force appears to be in good condition; but the ammunition is mighty nigh played out. Take it all in all, I don't think we've done so bad."

"I know where we can get a small supply, an' jest now every one counts," Eph cried, as he hurriedly pulled away the timbers from the door and ran out before his companions could check him.

Four of the enemy lay dead within a distance of fifty

yards, and it was neither a long nor a difficult task to secure their well-filled belts.

This done, he returned to the fort, and secured the door-way once more, saying, as he entered:

"Here's enough to last another turn, I reckon, an' when they are gone we'll most likely gather in other Greasers who won't have life enough left to kick at havin' to share with us."

Nina, who had come out of her place of refuge as soon as the firing ceased, insisted on bandaging Eph's wound; but he declared he only allowed her to do so because of friendship, since it was too trifling a scratch to even think about.

By this time Espinosa's groans were so loud that the tender-hearted girl pleaded with the men to release him from his painful position.

"It is terrible to keep him there while he is wounded," she said, pleadingly, to Barstow.

"I know it, miss; but he's doin' more good on that timber than he ever did before. Three or four times them villains would have forced their way in if it hadn't been for fear of killin' him. Besides, he oughter be able to stand a little pain after causin' so much."

"Shoot me if you wish; but don't leave me here!" the wretch cried, piteously, and Nina begged more earnestly than before.

"He thinks it'll be possible to give us the slip in some way if we take him down, an' yet there's no chance for him to get away from his doom. What we're doin' looks cruel; but it's only justice."

"If you must kill him, do so at once. Put him out of his misery."

"He shall come down, miss," the ranchman said, after a short time of hesitation, "but we can't spare him yet a while; he may come in handy before this dance is ended."

Nina had carried her point, and, for the present, that was sufficient to satisfy her.

Espinosa was released from his lofty position and allowed to lie on the floor; but his hands and feet were fastened securely lest during the next engagement he should do mischief.

Nina gave him water, and would have paid some attention to his wounds but for his persistent refusal.

"The sooner I bleed to death the better it will be for me," he said, sulkily.

"Sich cattle as that ain't worth botherin' about, miss," the ranchman said. "I'll answer for it there isn't blood enough flowin' to kill a chicken—— They are gettin' ready for another rush!"

The enemy had ridden slightly nearer, and were now in close order, evidently waiting the word of command to advance.

Seized with a sudden thought, Barstow snatched the light mantle from Nina's shoulders, and, handing it to Dale, said, quickly:

"Go out an' wave that till you can make 'em understand we want a parley."

Then, as the boy obeyed, he turned to Espinosa:

"I am goin' to call one of your men in, an' I want you to talk to him in English."

"What shall I say?"

"Tell him that the moment they make another charge I shall put a bullet through your head. Take good care that you don't speak a word of Spanish, or this will talk quicker than is pleasant," and the ranchman touched his revolver significantly.

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Then I'll shoot first and talk afterward."

The signal had been seen, and one of the Greasers was advancing at a slow pace toward the ruins.

"Will you give him the message?" the stockman asked.

"Help me on my feet."

"Now remember what I say," Barstow added, cocking a revolver. "One word more than I have told you, and the end has come!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FLIGHT.

In order that the man who was advancing toward the ruins might be certain it was his chief who was delivering the message, Barstow removed the fetters from Espinosa's feet, and led him a short distance outside the ruins.

Here he halted with his prisoner, while Dale and Eph stood on the alert, ready to shoot at the first sign of treachery.

The Greaser came slowly on as if fearing some trick, but stopped while yet a long distance away.

"Come nearer, you fool!" Espinosa cried, angrily.

The man obeyed hesitatingly, and when he was where it would be possible to converse without absolutely shouting, the leader repeated the message as spoken by the ranchman, adding to it:

"To make a charge now is to insure my death, therefore you must return to the camp."

The fellow began to reply in Spanish; but Barstow prevented him by crying, as he leveled his rifle:

"Speak English, or it will be the worse both for you and him."

"I was only going to say that the boys refuse to look upon him any longer as the leader."

"What is that?" Espinosa shrieked.

"We have followed you long enough, and shed more blood through your crazy fancies than ever we did with a chance of gain. This crowd must be wiped out to settle the score which began when we were such fools as to try and rescue you; but we have another leader."

"Who is he?"

"Lousano."

"He, the wretch! The coward! The idiot!" and the deposed chief worked himself into a perfect frenzy of rage.

"Hold on," Barstow said, sternly. "This talk amounts to nothing. The question is whether that gang will leave us alone in order to save your life?"

"No, a hundred times no!" the horseman shouted.

This reply served to show Espinosa that he must use fair words instead of foul if he wished to accomplish anything, and he began to speak rapidly in Spanish.

"Stop that!" the ranchman cried, as he raised his revolver. "Another word I can't understand, and you are a dead Greaser!"

Espinosa paid no attention to the threat, but continued speaking.

Dale and Eph, who were watching the proceedings intently, saw a look of determination come over Barstow's face, and before one could have counted five the weapon was discharged.

The deposed chief of the desperadoes sprang high in the air, whirled around like a top, and then fell forward on his face, a corpse.

"Thanks, señor, you have saved us much trouble," the

horseman said, as he raised his sombrero politely, and then plunging the spurs deep into the pony's flanks rode off at full speed to rejoin his companions.

"My father's death is at last avenged!" Dale said, with a long-drawn sigh, as he turned away from the disagreeable scene.

Although Nina had seen a reckless spilling of blood during her enforced stay with the Mexicans, this slaying of Espinosa seemed so much like murder that she grew faint and sick at heart.

Seating herself on a charred timber at the rear of the ruins, she covered her face with her hands as if to shut out the terrible sight.

"I reckon you think that was a cruel thing to do, miss," the ranchman said, as he barred the doorway as well as was possible with the material at hand.

"It isn't for me to say; but I wish I hadn't seen it."

"So do I; but it couldn't be helped. That wretch was evidently telling his men how to attack us, hopin' by so doin' to be rescued and get the leadership again. It was his life or ours, an' I'd rather wipe him out than go under myself."

There was no further time to discuss the matter, since the Greasers were making ready for another attack, and the defenders of the ruins were forced to stand to their weapons.

On this occasion, instead of charging in a body, the enemy rode around and around the ranch, keeping at long range, and watching for an opportunity to shoot without

exposing their precious bodies to the murderous fire of the besieged.

"It's no use wasting cartridges while they stay at that distance. The best marksman in the world couldn't hit a moving target at that distance, an' we've got none too much ammunition."

Having given this opinion, Barstow calmly lighted his pipe, and gave himself no further concern in the matter, save to keep his eyes upon the horsemen as they dashed to and fro.

"How long are we likely to stand this sort of thing?" Eph finally asked.

"Till nightfall. I allow we can sneak off by that time. These fellers haven't got the leader they had before Espinosa turned up his toes, an' the new chief is most likely too green at the business to keep 'em at work!"

"Where will you head for?"

"The Morey ranch. Between here an' there we should find Miss Nina's father, for it stands to reason he knows what has happened by this time."

"And are we to travel on foot?" Dale asked, as he looked at the delicate girl, wondering how she would bear the fatigue of such a journey.

"I don't see any other way, unless we should have the luck to fall in with some ponies, which ain't likely."

"I'm not so sure it can be done," Eph said, doubtfully.

"I am, for I've got the thing figured out, an' count on puttin' it through all right. Before mornin' we should be among the boulders on Swazey's Run, an' can hold

our own there as well as here in case they tumble to our game."

Barstow spoke so confidently that the others looked upon the attempt as something which would be made regardless of what they should say, and the fact that a change of base was decided upon gave all a certain relief of mind.

During the day the enemy kept at a distance, but still riding around the ranch at intervals, and, when the shadows of evening began to gather, the ranchman said, in a tone of satisfaction:

"They've used up their ponies, so we needn't fear there'll be much of a chase made to-night, unless they see us when we leave."

"Why do they want to attack now?" Dale asked. "There's nothing to be gained by it."

Barstow made no reply; but he gazed toward Nina in a significant way which told that he believed the outlaws were bent on recapturing the prize their former leader had valued so highly.

When night had fully come the ranchman began his preparations for the flight.

"We need grub and water, an' there's plenty of both to be had for the trouble of going for them. You two stay here on the alert while I forage."

He was nearly absent half-an-hour, and during that time the hoof-beats on the plain told that the Greasers had not raised the siege.

"I've got enough for a couple of days' rations," he said, as he laid a heavy burden on the floor. "We must

divide this stuff into three loads, and contrive some way to fasten them on our backs."

"Did you see any of the enemy?" Dale asked.

"No; but I heard plenty. They are out to prevent us from makin' a sneak, but I don't reckon it'll amount to stoppin' us."

It was quite a while before Barstow had the loads packed to please him. Then the provisions were tied to each one's back, and all were ready for the venture.

The order of marching was with Barstow in the lead, Eph behind him followed by Nina, and Dale bringing up the rear.

As a matter of course, the girl carried no burden, although she pleaded hard to be allowed to do so.

"Your part of the work is to help yourself along as fast as we want to travel, an' I reckon that'll be job enough," the ranchman had replied, in a tone which prevented any further argument.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening when the barricade at the doorway was removed, and the little party ventured forth.

The light of the stars was obscured by dark clouds, and everything seemed favorable for the attempt.

Barstow led the way through the ranch at right angles with the course he intended to pursue, the others following silently in single file.

Now and then the footfalls of the Greasers' ponies could be heard as proof that they were keeping strict guard, and Dale shuddered as he thought of what the result might and probably would be if they were surprised

in the open with the main body of the outlaws close at hand.

They arrived at the fences of the cattle corral without an alarm having been given, and then the ranchman turned sharply off in the proper direction, striking directly across the plain where was not so much as a bush to afford them shelter in case pursuit should be made.

During the next twenty minutes they traveled at the best possible pace, and then was heard from the rear a loud shouting and yelling, mingled with the report of a rifle.

"They've found out that we've given 'em the slip!" Barstow said, in a low tone. "It's a question of runnin' now, for we mustn't be overhauled in this place. Give me your rifle, Dale, and take Nina by one hand, while Eph holds the other."

"What is that for?" the girl asked, displaying considerable alarm.

"We are goin' to run, an' there won't be much chance you can keep pace with us unless they bear a hand."

The two did as they were directed, and the ranchman led the way at a speed which promised to distance his companions.

Not until all were thoroughly blown did Barstow slacken the pace, and as the fugitives stood panting, he said:

"I reckon we've got a safe distance off——"

The sentence was not finished, for at that moment the trampling of horses was heard, and Eph added, grimly:

"You spoke a leetle too quick, pard. It's a case of keepin' our faces to the Greasers now."

"You and I will do that, while Dale goes on with Nina. I reckon we can hold 'em off a while, an' then make another run for it."

"Dale and I will not leave you," Nina replied, firmly.

"You two will obey orders, an' that's a fact. Be off, lad, while there's time. Keep straight on; take your rifle, an' when you hear two shots fired almost together, answer with one, so's we'll know where you are."

Dale seized Nina's hand despite her protests, and the two went out alone into the darkness, leaving the brave men to cover their flight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FORTUNATE CATCH.

"Suppose they should never find us again?" Nina asked, as Dale hurried her along at full speed.

"There's little danger of our being lost. If the Mexicans didn't trouble us, I could guide you to the ranch in time."

"It doesn't seem possible those two would be able to hold the entire party in check."

"They are less in numbers than when you were first captured, and besides, I don't fancy more than half-a-dozen are in pursuit. The others would be likely to go in different directions."

This conversation was not prolonged.

The speed at which they were traveling rendered talking difficult, and during the next ten minutes they walked on in silence.

Then the report of firearms rang out in the distance, and the fugitives knew that their friends were fighting for life.

"With no shelter, they will surely be killed!" Nina cried, in an agony of apprehension, as Dale involuntarily came to a halt.

"Men don't shoot very true in the darkness, and I'll back Barstow and Eph against a dozen Greasers."

Although Dale spoke so confidently, he was far from feeling easy in mind, and during the short time the engagement lasted his fears were great, almost overpowering.

Then the rattle of musketry suddenly ceased, and he asked himself whether the outlaws had given up the attempt, or if they had succeeded in capturing his friends.

"Is it over?" Nina asked, in a trembling voice.

"It seems so."

"Who has been victorious?"

"I wish I knew," was the fervent reply.

"Suppose we wait here a while instead of going any farther? It may be that one or both are wounded, and can't travel as far as this."

Dale was perfectly willing to act upon the suggestion, for the same thought had come into his mind, and the two seated themselves on the ground to await the answer to the question which was of so much importance to both.

Thirty minutes passed, each one seemingly containing ten times the proper number of seconds, and then Dale sprang to his feet, with difficulty restraining himself from giving vent to a cheer of triumph as he saw two familiar forms approaching.

"Are you wounded?" Nina asked, anxiously, as the ranchman and Eph halted in front of her.

"Haven't got a scratch. We tried a dodge that puzzled the Greasers, an' they were glad to draw off after a bit."

"What was the dodge?"

"You see, there wasn't any timber, an' we laid down

where the grass was reasonably high. They couldn't see us, an' at the first shot we brought down two, wingin' the ponies with a second. They sent bullets all around us, but didn't do any harm, an' after we'd laid out another, the whole gang concluded to ride back. It was a lucky scrimmage for us, because by it we've got two good lariats an' a fresh supply of cartridges."

"Do you think they have given up the chase?"

"I reckon so; it's costin' too much to hunt us," Barstow replied, with a pardonable show of pride, and then he suggested that the journey be continued.

Again the travelers started in the same order as before, and this time they walked in a more leisurely fashion.

Four halts were made during the night; not because the male members of the party needed rest; but the exertion was beginning to tell sadly on Nina, and Dale understood that she would not be able to keep pace with them during another tramp.

When the sun rose the ranchman looked eagerly around, and his face lighted up with pleasure as he recognized the landmarks in the vicinity.

"We are not more than two miles from the Somers ranch, and if you can hold out that distance, Miss Nina, we'll see to it that you don't have to do any more walkin' this day."

"I can keep on as long as you desire," Nina replied, trying bravely to fight off the weariness which threatened to overpower her.

"I wish it wasn't necessary to take another step; but

since it must be done, let's push on at our best gait and finish the job soon."

The thought that they were near those who would act as friends, and supply all needful wants, infused fresh courage into every member of the party, and the distance was covered in a reasonably short space of time.

A bitter disappointment awaited them.

Instead of the collection of buildings which should be seen on a well-appointed ranch, nothing but a pile of ruins met their gaze.

Espinosa's gang had left their trail marked by fire and blood.

"More of that rascal's work!" Barstow muttered between his tightly closed teeth. "I am sorry we allowed him to die so easy."

The other members of the party made no comment.

It was as if fate could have nothing more in store for them which was evil, and a feeling of despondency took possession of all.

"There's no sense in standin' here like a lot of wooden figgers," the ranchman said, after a long pause during which the little party had been gazing in silence at the evidence of bloodshed and devastation. "We may find something there to help us along, and even if we don't, it's better to halt where we can find a shelter in case the Greasers are followin', than to stay in the open."

Wearily the four advanced, halting when they stood before the ruins of the main building.

As at Howland's, the same signs of a struggle were to

be seen, and to describe them would be simply a repetition.

A small storehouse, quite a distance from the other buildings, had been left untouched by the flames, and to this the ranchman led his companions.

It had evidently been used as quarters for some of the defenders of the ranch when Espinosa attacked the place, for several hammocks were yet slung from the walls, and everything told of recent occupancy.

One of these swinging beds was at once appropriated to Nina's use, and the poor girl's eyes closed in slumber almost as soon as she laid down.

The others could not afford to rest until certain necessary work had been attended to, such as Barstow mapped out after Nina's comfort had been assured.

"There is just a chance that I may find a stray pony or two in the corral," he said, as he beckoned for his companions to follow him out of doors. "I'll have a look around, and you two hunt for bridles, saddles, and provisions while I'm gone. The fire hasn't burned so well but that we should get something out of the place."

Dale and Eph at once began a search of the ranch, overturning charred timbers, digging amid the *débris*, or peering into such corners of the dwellings as were left unconsumed, and in this manner found more than enough to repay them for their labor.

Two saddles, both decidedly the worse for use, three bridles, and a fine rifle were discovered, while in addition they had a sufficient amount of provisions to furnish them with food another day.

"Now we've got grub enough for forty-eight hours," Eph said, as he surveyed the collection, "and if Barstow finds any ponies, we sha'n't be in sich a very tight place."

"Will it pay to take the rifle along?"

"If we get a chance to ride, I say yes; but if not it won't pay for carrying. Better bring it, an' make up your mind afterward."

"When they returned to the building where Nina was sleeping nothing remained to be done, and both stretched themselves out in the hammocks for a long-needed nap.

An hour later they were awakened by the ranchman, who first called them out of doors, and then said:

"This is a nice way to stand guard! Do you believe all danger is over simply because we have got a few miles start of the Greasers?"

"I didn't think there could be any harm in going to sleep," Dale replied, in an apologetic tone.

"None has been done, luckily; but something might have happened, and one must be on the watch all the time. What did you find?"

Dale gave an account of the article brought in, and concluded by asking:

"Did you catch a pony?"

"I've got three in the corral, and we shall make the remainder of the journey in a more comfortable fashion. Now, Eph, you stand guard, and Dale and I'll take a little nap."

The day was passed in resting.

Nothing occurred to cause alarm; it was as if Espinosa's men were a thousand miles away, save for the

evidences of their work; and then Barstow aroused all hands to make ready for the second stage of the journey.

Nina, who had slept during the entire day, was the first on her feet, and as she sprang to the floor the rifle Dale had found was directly in front of her.

She looked at it for an instant, and then, raising it in her hands, asked, excitedly:

"Where did this come from?"

"I found it among the ruins," Dale replied.

Her face paled, and, hugging the weapon to her bosom, she faltered:

"It is my father's! Look! here is his name!"

Her companions gathered around her as she pointed to some lines on the lock which had hitherto escaped their attention, where was written by the graver's tool in small letters the name, "Walter Morey."

"He must have come this way in search of me, and was here when Espinosa attacked the ranch," she cried, wildly. "Show me where it came from."

Before Dale could make an intelligible explanation, she had darted out of the building, and was searching frantically among the charred timbers for further proof that her father had been in the ill-fated place.

"If he did come here we mustn't let her search the ranch, for she may find more than enough to break her heart," Barstow said, after watching the grief-stricken girl's movements for a few moments. "I fancy she has hit upon the truth, an' that Morey has met his death here; but she can't be allowed to learn the fact. Eph, catch and saddle the ponies, while I take her away."

It would have been very sweet to Dale if he could have comforted Nina at this moment; but she refused to listen even to the arguments advanced by the ranchman, and would have overturned the timbers with her own delicate hands, or made a brave attempt at so doing, if Barstow had not absolutely forced her away.

"We shall soon be at your home," he said, in a soothing tone, "and there the truth will be known. You must come with us, for by remaining all hands may fall into the clutches of those devils who have wrought this ruin."

The thought that she might be keeping her companions in a place of danger served to arouse her better than anything else could have done, and she suffered herself to be led toward the gates, even while believing the remains of her father might be found among the blackened timbers.

The ranchman lost no time in getting his party together for a continuation of the painful journey, and almost before Nina realized the fact, they were traveling rapidly away from the ill-fated ranch.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MOREY RANCH.

During the first portion of the journey, when they were beset on every hand by danger, and forced to walk, Nina had been cheerful, almost happy; but now the belief that her father had been murdered plunged her into the silence of deepest grief.

As a matter of course, the best saddle was put on the most trusty pony for her use.

Barstow insisted that Dale should take the second and last saddle since it was hardly probable he was as experienced a horseman as the others.

This arrangement left one pony with no other trappings than a well-patched bridle, and on this sorry-looking steed the ranchman and Eph alternately rode.

Both Dale and Nina insisted that they be allowed to do their share of the walking, but Barstow would not listen to such a proposition.

"It is necessary we should make the best possible time," he said, "an' either of you on foot would hold us back. We'll travel as we are, an' thank our lucky stars that we can ride half the time."

Dale remained very close to Nina's side.

His respect and sympathy for her sorrow prevented him from trying to engage her in conversation, but he

was ever on the alert to save her from any annoyances which might arise."

From this point the journey to the Morey ranch was uneventful.

The little party pushed on at the best possible pace, Barstow and Eph walking mile after mile at a rapid gait, as if such a thing as fatigue was unknown, and when the fourth afternoon was about half-spent the travelers drew rein in front of the ruins.

Eagerly they searched for signs which might tell that the owner of the ranch had visited the place since that terrible night when Espinosa's gang wrought so much destruction.

Barstow and Eph went carefully over the ground in the immediate vicinity of the ruins, and the former said, in a low tone, after a long and patient search:

"There's no reason why we should let Miss Nina hear what conclusion we've arrived at; but I must say that I don't allow Morey has been here since those devils lighted in on us."

"Well, what does that prove?" Dale asked.

"That we might have found all that is left of him if we had searched at Somers'."

"How do you make it out?"

"Suppose he had been here? Then the chances are he'd left some signs in case his friends came along."

"Still it isn't proof he was killed at Somers'."

"Not exactly; but it comes nigh enough to satisfy me. Before getting back here he heard what Espinosa had

done, an' started on the trail at once, overtakein' him where we found the rifle."

Dale made no reply. The reasoning seemed plausible, and he turned away to follow Nina, who was wandering to and fro like one distracted.

She gave no sign she knew he was near; but it satisfied him to be by her side.

Half-an-hour after arriving a shout from Eph caused both Nina and Dale to look up suddenly, when they saw, coming wearily over the plain from the south, the travel-stained figure of a woman.

"It is Martha!" Nina exclaimed, in surprise.

"Who is she?"

"My old nurse; the one whom you helped on the way from Espinosa's camp to Howland's."

"I didn't think it possible she could have escaped, and that she has done so should give you courage, for a man would surely stand a better chance of getting away than a woman."

"You mean that I should believe father is yet alive."

"I certainly do. There is no reason for giving up all hope until we have better proof than the mere finding of his rifle."

"Does Barstow think the same?"

"He knows nothing about it," was the equivocal reply.

By this time Martha had arrived, and was clasping Nina in her arms, both sobbing as if the meeting were a misfortune rather than a cause for rejoicing.

It was several moments before the newcomer was

sufficiently composed to be able to answer the questions Barstow showered upon her.

Then she managed to tell in a disconnected way the story of the last fight at Howland's.

After Espinosa's followers had succeeded in setting the buildings on fire, the female portion of the household were escorted across the ranch in the same direction as that taken by Dale when he escaped.

The manager of the place made no further effort, after the desperate fight, which did not check the enemy's advance, to defend the burning property. His only aim was then to save life.

The Greasers made a savage attack on the party of white men as they marched steadily across the open with the women in their midst, and more than one of the brave fellows was shot down; but the retreat was a success.

Under cover of the thicket Espinosa's gang was held in check until nightfall, when the survivors started across the plain, following nearly the same trail as had Barstow's party.

They had no ponies, and the women could walk but slowly, therefore Martha's late arrival was easily accounted for.

"There's one thing certain," the ranchman said, when the woman had finished her story. "We can't move from here for three or four days at the earliest, an' it wouldn't be wise to go if we could, for I'm countin' on seeing some of the other boys turn up. The best thing to do is to rig a shelter for Miss Nina and Martha, an' take things comfortable."

"You boss the job, and we'll obey orders," Dale replied, glad of an opportunity to work, for Nina might become interested in what was being done, and anything was better than to have her brooding over her father's absence.

The ranchman set about the task with a will, and before sunset a shanty of half-burned boards had been erected.

It was not a very pretentious building; but it would serve to protect the women from the sun and dew, which was all that could have been expected.

Martha found several cooking utensils in the ruins; Eph shot a calf which had been separated from the herd when the Greasers stampeded the cattle, and Dale gathered a supply of vegetables from the half-destroyed garden, therefore the fugitives were not likely to suffer from lack of food.

The night passed quietly.

Strict guard was kept; but nothing occurred to cause alarm, and when the morning came Barstow continued the work of erecting such temporary buildings as would serve to shelter the entire party.

At noon Martha had ready a generous dinner for the laborers, and Barstow was on the point of carving the meat with his hunting-knife, when Eph sprang to his feet in alarm.

"The Greasers have followed us!" he cried, excitedly, as he pointed toward the south, where could be seen a party of horsemen riding at full speed in the direction of the ranch.

Barstow glanced toward them for an instant, and then seized his rifle, as he said, in a whisper, to Dale:

"I reckon Eph is right, an' it looks as if we might have a hot time. Get the women into the ruins of the main building, an' we'll make a stand there."

Nina made no reply when the boy asked her to follow him, but obeyed instantly.

She had been in danger so long that it seemed only natural new perils should arise.

The ammunition and the weapons were carried into the improvised fort, and while the ranchman did all he could to strengthen the defenses, Eph gathered a small supply of provisions and water, concluding his work just as Dale shouted:

"Those are not Mexicans, but white men!"

Barstow clambered upon the timbers, watching the newcomers intently for a moment, and then began shouting like one who has suddenly gone mad:

"It's Morey! it's Morey!" he cried and Nina grew pale from very excess of joy.

"Are you certain?" she faltered.

"Jest as sure as you'll be in five minutes' time."

The horsemen must have observed the figure standing on the ruins, and recognized the ranchman, for the ponies were spurred harder and harder, until they seemed to fly, and in less time than Barstow had said Nina was sobbing in her father's arms.

The party which had just arrived was made up of fourteen ranchmen, who, under Mr. Morey's leadership, had been searching for Espinosa's gang, and returned to the

ranch only in the hope that the story heard at Somers' relative to Nina's escape might be true.

They had not been in that fight, having left the ranch twenty-four hours previously, and missed the Greasers by following the trail which led to the camp which Dale's party first found.

"We saw Morey's rifle there, an' made certain he'd been wiped out," Barstow said, as the men told their story while the father and daughter were a short distance away, enjoying the happiness of the reunion.

"He traded with Somers' nephew the night we stopped there, and I suppose the poor fellow got the worst of the scrimmage, as did nearly all hands," one of the party replied.

Then Barstow told of the death of Espinosa; Eph found an old friend among the newcomers, and it seemed to Dale as if he had been left entirely alone.

He was in that frame of mind when the slightest action seems for a double purpose, and the fact that Nina had not so much as glanced at him since her father arrived was sufficient to plunge him into a desperate fit of the "blues."

"I was a fool to fancy she cared anything for me," he said, moodily, as he walked away, leaving the others in cheery conversation, while, as Eph afterward expressed it, he "went moonin' off by himself."

For a time no one appeared to miss him, and, lying at full length on the ground, he was trying to convince himself it would have been better had he never come out vic-

torious in his duel with the Mexican, when a light touch on his shoulder caused him to raise his head.

It was Nina, and she said, with a smile:

"My father wants to thank you for having saved my life."

"But I didn't do anything of the kind," Dale said, in confusion, as he rose awkwardly to his feet.

"I am certain my daughter speaks the truth," Mr. Morey replied, as he took both the boy's hands in his. "I know how faithfully you followed her when she was in Espinosa's power, and at a time when a large body of men might have been excused for giving up in despair."

"It was Barstow and Eph who did it all. I simply helped them, sir."

"I have told father the whole truth," Nina said, laughingly, as she took Dale by the arm, forcing him to walk by her side, "therefore you needn't be so modest."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BARGAIN.

Two hours later Mr. Morey learned from Barstow and Eph all the particulars of Nina's rescue, and the part which Dale had played was given due prominence in the story.

The owner of the ranch was particularly interested in the discovery of the mine, and, after asking for all the details of Mr. Wrightman's return to Silver City and subsequent murder, he said to Dale:

"There is no question but that you can prove up a good claim, and I will attend to the business as soon as we arrive at the city."

"Are you going there very soon, sir?" Barstow asked.

"We will set out to-morrow. These buildings must be rebuilt as soon as possible, and we need stockmen at once. I hope to recover a good portion of the cattle that were stampeded, and in order to do so a large force will be necessary."

"Can you enter Dale's claim with no further description than what we have given?"

"No; we must send some one there who can attend to the matter. There is no reason to fear the remnants of Espinosa's gang any longer, for they have crossed the line before this."

"The boy has got color enough in sight to make him rich if he only takes that much out, an' I reckon his capital isn't so big that he can put up works."

"It is just what I propose he shall do. He will borrow what money is needed from me, and no matter how much is required, by lending it I sha'n't begin to pay the debt I owe."

"I don't intend to keep all the claim myself," Dale managed to say.

"What do you count on doing with it?"

"Barstow and Eph are entitled to a full share, and if you think it is so well worth working, why not divide it into fourths, and own an interest in what you are so good as to say you will open."

"Because that wouldn't be just toward you."

"I can't see why not, if it is what I particularly want. I don't know anything about working such a claim, and if Barstow is right, one-quarter of the income will be more than enough for me."

It was some time before Mr. Morey would listen to the proposition; but when Barstow and Eph understood that Dale was in earnest regarding their shares, they urged the ranch-owner to accept, and he finally agreed, with the proviso that he ultimately be allowed to pay a certain amount for the property.

Once this matter was settled, there was no lack of food for conversation, and the four discussed the business in all its bearings, Nina taking the part of interested spectator.

It was decided that two of Mr. Morey's late companions

should go back with Barstow to the site of the mine in order to get the correct location, while the others continued on to Silver City.

The one thing which caused Nina considerable uneasiness was that the mine had once been worked and then abandoned.

"If it had been rich, people wouldn't have closed it," she said, when all the details of the next day's work had been arranged, and there was a pause in the conversation. "Doesn't it prove that there wasn't ore enough to pay for working?"

"Not a bit of it," her father replied. "If you had a history of New Mexico you would read in it something like this: 'The mines of the State, especially those of silver, were extensively worked by the Spaniards down to the year 1680, when the revolt of the Pueblos, caused by the cruel slavery to which they were reduced in working for the precious metals, resulted in the filling up and concealment of every mine in the country during the thirteen years of Pueblo control. The shafts of these mines are frequently discovered.' Therefore, you can understand that the Last Chance may be very rich, and yet have been closed."

"There's no question about its payin', however you choose to work it," Eph said, decidedly. "I know what I'm talkin' about when I say there ain't a vein around here that's a marker alongside of it."

"As soon as it has been located, and matters have been straightened out here, we'll go down and have a look at

it," Mr. Morey said, as he rose to his feet, thus intimating that the conference was at an end.

Barstow left the party to make arrangements for the return trip to Last Chance Mine; the owner of the ranch was called away by one of the strangers, and Eph, seeing that Nina and Dale were more interested in each other than in anything else, said, with a grin, as he lounged slowly off:

"If you think you can spare me a bit, I'll hunt for a lariat I lost here the other day. Don't get lonesome, for I'll be back in less'n five minutes."

This feeble attempt at wit had the effect of confusing the young people, and instead of enjoying the opportunity, as would have been the case under different circumstances, they looked and felt embarrassed.

Nina spoke of the intended journey to Silver City, of the desire to see her mother again, and such topics; but never a word of the dangers they had shared together, or the moments when the prospect of a speedy death brought them very near to each other.

Dale said very little, but he kept his eyes fastened on his companion's fair face until the blushes mantled the skin a rosy red.

The not particularly satisfactory interview was interrupted by a call to supper, and Dale had no further opportunity to speak in private with the girl who owed her life to him.

On the following morning Barstow and two others set out for the mine, while the remainder of the party rode toward Silver City.

When they arrived, Dale, who had not spent any of the contents of the buckskin bag presented by the miners, went with Eph to "The Palace" to board until such time as work could be begun at the Last Chance.

The two were at once surrounded by a crowd of excited men, every one of whom had a question to ask, and, as each wanted to speak first, the tumult was great.

Finally, by shouting until he was red in the face, Jake Myers succeeded in silencing the eager party, and then asked Dale in a solemn tone:

"Is it true that the Greaser Espinosa has been killed?"

"Yes."

"Was he the rascal who murdered your father?"

"Yes."

"Did you have a hand in the game?"

"Not exactly."

"Indeed he did," Eph cried. "It was the boy who first caught the chap, an' held him till we could come up. If it hadn't been for Dale, neither Barstow nor I would have kept on the trail, an' Morey's girl would now be a prisoner while Espinosa sneaked away with her to his ranch."

"How was the Greaser killed?" Myers asked.

Eph told the story in all its details, the assembled throng listening with absorbing interest, and when the speaker concluded he and Dale were suddenly lifted to a table top by a dozen pairs of brawny arms, amid a series of deafening cheers that threatened to shake "The Palace" roof.

When it was possible to make himself heard, Myers said to Dale:

"I want you an' Eph to understand that anything in this house is yours as long as you care to stay. There's nothin' too good for a lad who's shown that he's got sand, an' don't you forget it."

It was several hours before the two could "break away" from their entertainers.

The news of their arrival had spread through the city, and other miners were constantly arriving, each of whom insisted on hearing the story, until Eph actually grew tired of talking.

When he could leave, Dale went to the shanty where he and his father had spent so many sad and happy hours.

Everything was as on the day when he started on the Greaser's trail, and the occupant said, when Dale came up:

"I'm glad to see you back, my boy, an' still more so to hear that you did what you started out for. I'll be away from here as soon as I can get my traps together, an' you shall have the place to yourself before sunset."

"But I don't want it. I would like to think it was not to be torn down, and, if you care to live here, I'll turn over all my title to the place."

"Ain't you goin' to stay in town?"

"Not very many days, although I suppose you'll see me here often. We run across the vein father discovered, and are intending to work it."

"Put her there, my boy," the miner cried in delight, as he extended his hand. "I am glad you've struck it rich. I allers allowed Owen Wrightman would come on the top of the heap some day, and he did, even if the benefit

was never reaped by him. The best part of the whole business is that the Greaser was wiped out in proper shape, though it would have suited me better if it hadn't been done quite so quick."

It was late in the evening when Eph and Dale were at liberty to retire.

Silver City was in a state of ferment over the news they brought, and the miners would have had them tell the story over and over again until morning, had not Jake Myers interfered, and insisted that they be allowed to rest.

Not for two days did Dale see Nina, and then it was only for a few moments, as she passed on the street with her father.

He could not muster sufficient courage to call upon her at the canvas dwelling where she was boarding, but spent all his spare time walking around that way in the hope of getting a glance of the one who seemed to belong to him because of the perils encountered in each other's company.

Five days elapsed before Barstow and his companions arrived.

They had ascertained the exact location of the old mine, and within an hour after their coming Mr. Morey entered the claim in the names of the four partners.

"There is no longer any reason why we should delay opening it," he said to Dale. "I think Eph can take care of the preliminary work, and by the time he has cleared the tunnel we shall have the machinery already ordered."

"When are we to start for the spot?" Eph asked.

"To-morrow morning, if you can get ready. Hire half-a-dozen men, and Barstow will attend to the outfit."

Eph and the stockman were eager to begin the task of taking out the precious metal, and to that end labored so energetically that the party was ready at daylight on the next morning.

This haste caused Dale no little sorrow, for because of it he was forced to leave Silver City without seeing Nina again, which was to him a most grievous disappointment.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ONE YEAR LATER.

Twelve months from the day when Dale, Barstow, and Eph left Silver City to reopen the Last Chance Mine, the spot where all three had skulked around trying to rescue Nina from Espinosa's clutches would not have been recognized even by those most familiar with it.

Around the mouth of the shaft into which the stockman and his companion once fell were huge stamp mills, and further away, in what Dale had called "the open," the place which he had not dared to cross lest a Greaser's bullet should reach him, was a flourishing town, boasting of almost as many wooden buildings as could have been found at Silver City.

The "thicket of bowlders" was also a scene of activity, for among the miniature cañons had been discovered traces of precious metal, and the huge mills were crushing into powder the rocks which had once performed their part in the rescue of Nina, and the subsequent capture of the Greaser chief.

Immediately the Last Chance shaft was opened the miners flocked from every quarter, and many were the rich claims entered up before the town of Wrightman was fully established.

It was said, and neither of the four partners ever con-

tradicted the statement that the vein rediscovered by Dale's father was the richest in New Mexico; that more ore was taken out than from any other three mines in the vicinity.

The town already boasted of two hotels, twenty or thirty boarding-houses, half-a-dozen stores, and saloons in such quantity as it is usual to see in similar settlements.

Dale, or Wrightman, as the miners called him, looked a dozen years older than when we saw him last, and on this particular day he was arrayed in his best.

The working clothes he ordinarily wore had been replaced by tightly-fitting buckskin riding trousers, a Mexican jacket, and a sombrero profusely bedecked with silver tags, fringe, and buttons, and hipboots to which were attached large spurs made from the pure metal as taken from the Last Chance.

The pony he rode was the best to be found within a radius of fifty miles, which is giving him quite a record, since there were many fine animals in the vicinity.

He had just mounted in front of the frame dwelling where he kept bachelors' hall with Barstow and Eph, when the latter came from one of the "crushers" near by, with a quizzical expression on his face as he said:

"I reckon you're countin' on strikin' across to Silver City, eh?"

"Of course not. Have you forgotten that Mr. Morey promised to be here to-day?"

"That's a fact; queer I let it go out of my mind. What a pity he didn't agree to bring Miss Nina with him.

Neither you nor I have laid eyes on her since the day before we started to open the Last Chance."

"You know very well he sent word that she was coming," Dale replied, as a blush came over his bronzed face.

"Then that accounts for the way you're rigged up. It kinder struck me all of a heap when you turned out like a full-blown rose. I allow you're reckonin' to ride along the trail a bit?"

"What's the use of poking fun at a fellow, Eph? You know how I feel, and I am going to settle matters before we come back, unless by some ill-chance I happen to miss the party."

"Now you're showin' sand ag'in, Dale," Eph said in a hearty tone. "By the way you've been moonin' round lately I was afraid it had all run out of your boots. Go in an' win, my boy, for that's what you're bound to do if you stick at it the same as when we was close on old Espinosa's heels."

Dale clasped his friend by the hand without speaking, and then, touching the pony with the spurs, rode off at full speed, followed by his partner's cheery cry:

"Good luck, my boy! You're bound to win!"

And the look on Dale's face told that he had won when he rode again into Wrightman by Nina's side, both looking consciously happy, and, perhaps, just a trifle foolish.

Mr. Morey had come to give his partners an account of the year's business, for he it was who attended to the finances, and from his report it was learned that not only had the Last Chance made all four wealthy beyond every expectation, but would continue to earn money for them,

in case they accepted an offer made by a party of Eastern capitalists to purchase a controlling interest in the mine.

It was decided to sell at the expiration of six months, and when that time rolled around those in whom we are interested retired from the business of mining.

Barstow and Eph purchased Howland's ranch, and went into cattle raising on a very large scale. They have prospered even better than their neighbors, but still continue to live within the sound of the stamp mills at Last Chance, as the ponderous machinery grinds out money for them from the rocks over which they toiled in making the tunnel to escape from the shaft and the Greasers.

To-day, for the incidents of this story happened a number of years ago, Dale is living quietly on the Morey ranch with Nina as his wife, and many times, as they ride to and fro over the plain, does she speak of the time when they traveled over the same ground on the Mexicans' trail from Last Chance Mine.

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IT is not necessary to introduce the now famous Frank Merriwell to the American boy. His name, associated as it is with the most marvelous exploits and heroic deeds, has been known and loved for years by countless youths on the western continent. This is the first time that the Frank Merriwell stories have appeared in cloth. The demand for them in this form grew so clamorous that it was no longer possible to delay publication. The edition is a handsome one, well illustrated, type good and large, and the covers are exceptionally fine.

Frank Merriwell's School Days

This is the title of the first book in the series, and surely never were schooldays so crowded with fun and incident as those of Frank Merriwell. Right in the beginning he risks his own life to save a girl in a battle royal with a mad dog. But, as well as heroism, there is true sport, as any boy will say who reads about the great baseball game in which Frank figures.

Frank Merriwell's Chums

In addition to the good fellows who make life pleasant for Frank Merriwell in the period covered by No. 1 of the series, we are here introduced to several others, who keep the ball rolling and distinguish themselves alongside their hero.

Frank Merriwell's Foes

Even the best of fellows cannot help making enemies while jealousy continues to play its part in school life. Frank is all that is manly and candid, but there are enemies in camp, and he is frequently called upon to prove his mettle in this the third volume in the series.

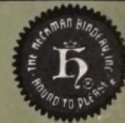
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